The
Untamed
Guild of Sylphania
Vol.2 · Part 1
by ShadowK

The Untamed Guild Of Sylphania Vol.2 Part-1.

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Chapter 5 – The Untamed Guild of Sylphania

More than ten thousand years had passed since the founding of Sylphania. The kingdom stood strong, a testament to unity, sacrifice, and courage. Yet far from the orderly streets and polished towers of the palace, chaos reigned in another form. In the heart of a sprawling city, a guild hall pulsed with life, its walls shaking from laughter, shouting, and the occasional crash of glass.

Inside, a woman sat alone on the guildmaster's chair, her crimson eyes distant, her thoughts far away. Her dark hair spilled over her shoulders, the firelight flickering across her face. Though she appeared calm, her mind raced with memories spanning millennia.

"Ten thousand years… or maybe more," she whispered softly, her voice nearly lost in the din of the hall. "After leaving the castle, I built this guild. Adventure. Freedom. Thrill. Life unbound. Mom… Sylph… Rex… I hope you can see me. I am free. I am the master of my own destiny. I am Scarlett."

A mug of beer landed on her lap with a wet splash.

"What the—?!" she shouted, rising to her feet, dripping liquid all over her tunic.

A young guild member cowered before her, stammering, "S-sorry, Master Scarlett!"

With a graceful sweep of her hands, shadowy tendrils of magic slithered from her fingertips. They wrapped the young man in tight, immovable bonds. "Generous mood today," she said, smirking. "You'll pay the price—by taking a proper shower of beer!"

The guild erupted in laughter, throwing mugs at the hapless man. Beer splashed, glasses shattered, and the hall became a whirl of chaos and cheer. It was a typical night in Sylax, the guild where rules were suggestions, and life was measured by the thrill of the moment.

Here, every member was untamed: warriors who jumped into danger for the fun of it, mages who tested spells in the middle of town squares, thieves who challenged each other to pranks instead of petty theft. They were wild, passionate, and devoted to the guild and its master, who led not with fear or command, but with the unrestrained power of example.

Outside the hall, the chaos spilled into the streets. The sound of laughter and breaking glass echoed through the alleys. A traveler paused, staring at the guild in disbelief.

"What… what's happening over there?" he asked a nearby shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper chuckled. "New, are you? That's Sylax. Don't worry, it's normal."

“A guild? But I’ve never seen one act like this,” the traveler said, eyebrows raised.

“Sylax isn’t like the others,” the shopkeeper explained. “They follow their own rules. The master… the master is wilder than anyone you’ll meet. Lowest rank officially, strongest by spirit. They don’t care about ranking. Freedom is their law.”

The traveler shook his head, stunned. “I… I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

The shopkeeper grinned. “And that’s why they’re famous. The Untamed Guild of Sylphania.”

Inside, Scarlett’s laughter rang louder than any bell. She raised her arms to the guild, her voice commanding yet joyful. “To Sylax! To freedom! To adventure that no one can cage!”

The guild cheered, the noise spilling into the night, carrying tales of wildness, camaraderie, and power.

Morning in Sylax was never quiet. Guild members raced through training yards, sparring with reckless abandon, testing spells, and performing acrobatics that left onlookers wide-eyed. Scarlett oversaw it all, her presence a whirlwind of authority and excitement.

A group of young members carried logs to test strength, while others competed to summon elemental creatures. Nyxia, the elemental spirit of fire, twirled flames into intricate patterns, teasing anyone who dared touch her magic. Kyxo, the kitsune, darted between shadows, creating illusions that startled even the most seasoned fighters.

“Remember!” Scarlett shouted over the noise, her eyes blazing, “This isn’t just chaos for chaos’s sake! Adventure, thrill, freedom—they’re our weapons. We survive because we are untamed, but we are also smart. We fight together, we live together!”

A deafening cheer erupted, and the guild went back to its controlled madness.

Even outside Sylax, whispers of the guild’s exploits spread. Travelers marveled at their fearless raids on wildlands, their clever negotiations with rival guilds, and the mysterious ways they always seemed to escape danger unharmed. And always at the center of it all was Scarlett, whose name inspired awe, respect, and envy in equal measure.

Though Scarlett was unseen by most, her twin sister, Sylph, occasionally observed from afar. Though she had taken a more structured role in Sylphania, her emerald eyes watched the untamed guild, smiling at Scarlett’s relentless spirit.

“She has found her own way,” Sylph whispered to the wind. “Her path is wild, but it is hers. I am proud… as I always knew I would be.”

Even from a distance, Sylph could feel the heartbeat of Sylax, the laughter, the chaos, and the unbreakable loyalty of those who had chosen adventure over order.

By day, Sylax trained, explored, and adventured. By night, their halls became a cacophony of life, music, and laughter. They accepted quests not for gold or fame, but for challenge, excitement, and the stories they would tell. Scarlett led them into forests where dragons slept, over mountains where storms raged, and across plains where warlords threatened peace.

Yet even in the midst of wildness, Scarlett never forgot the lessons of the past. She honored the memory of Rex, the sacrifices of the Covenant Order, and the love of her family. Every wild laugh carried the weight of freedom earned through centuries of struggle.

And in every corner of the guild hall, the motto was clear: Live free, fight hard, and never let the world cage your spirit.

The streets outside Sylax echoed with their presence. Merchants whispered tales of impossible feats, children gazed wide-eyed at the guild's audacity, and even hardened warriors nodded in respect.

They were not perfect. They were reckless. They were loud. But they were alive, and nothing could take that away.

And at the center of it all, Scarlett Yami, guild master of Sylax, smiled, her crimson eyes gleaming with the fire of ten thousand years.

"I am free," she whispered. "I am alive. And this… this is just the beginning."

The Untamed Guild of Sylphania had earned its legend.

Chapter 6 – The New Member in Guild

The day was calm in Sylphania. The wind carried the scent of roasted bread from the market, children's laughter echoed in the streets, and even the guild halls, known for their constant clamor, seemed strangely quiet. But that peace was about to be shattered.

A boy of seventeen, full of restless energy, darted through the street, stopping a merchant by tugging at his sleeve. "Excuse me,do you know where the guild Sylax is?"

The man's eyes widened. "You mean… the Untamed Guild of Sylphania?"

"Yes!" the boy said, grinning from ear to ear.

The merchant gave him a long, suspicious look. "And why would a brat like you want to go there?"

The boy puffed out his chest, voice bursting with confidence. "Because I'm going to be the world's strongest adventurer!"

The merchant chuckled, shaking his head. "Kids these days… Fine, listen carefully. Go straight for a mile until you reach a pond. From there, take the left road into the market area. Keep going in deeper, and if you're not lost by then, ask anyone and they'll point you toward Sylax."

The boy bowed dramatically. "Arigato!" Then, without hesitation, he sprinted off.

Two miles later, he stopped again. "Uh… sir, where's Sylax?"

"You went too far, kid. One mile extra."

"…Tch. Figures." He scratched his head, thanked the man, and turned back.

By the time he finally reached the pond, he was drenched in sweat, feet sore, and completely confused by the maze of alleys. Hours passed as he wandered aimlessly, asking and re-asking, until the sun hung low. His stomach growled, his legs trembled. "Ughhh…I've been searching all day… Where the heck is this guild?!"

And then fate answered.

From across the street, an adventurer walked past him. His cloak was tattered, his gait confident, and around his neck gleamed a silver locket—the symbol of Sylax etched into its surface.

The boy's eyes widened. Finally!

He stumbled after him, following through twisting alleys until—there it was.

The guild hall of Sylax.

It was larger than he imagined, its wooden beams scarred by age and battle, the banner of Sylax fluttering proudly above the door. From within came the unmistakable sound of laughter, mugs clashing, and windows rattling with song and arguments alike.

The boy's grin spread from cheek to cheek. He rubbed his nose, eyes shining with tears of excitement. "Finally…Sylax. I made it!"

Throwing the doors wide open, he stepped into chaos—and paradise.

Inside, the hall roared with life. Adventurers were arm-wrestling across broken tables, a group of mages used fire magic to light their cigars, and someone was already sleeping on a chandelier while two others argued beneath him about whether it would fall.

The boy's heart pounded. This was it. His dream.

He marched straight to the reception desk. "Hello!I want to join Sylax!"

The receptionist, a composed woman named Akira, raised her head from her papers. "Um… sir, I'm sorry. We don't… hire guild members like that."

"What do you mean?!" the boy exclaimed, slamming his hands down. "I came all this way to join Sylax! You can't just say no!"

Akira shifted nervously. "I-it's not that simple. Only the Guild Master can accept new members."

The boy froze for a second. Then his grin returned, fiercer than ever. "Then I'll call him out myself!"

Before Akira could stop him, the boy cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted across the hall, voice loud enough to shake the rafters:

"OYYYYYEEEE! OYYYYYEEEE! OLD MAN GUILD MASTER! COME OUT OF YOUR HOLE! WHERE ARE YOU HIDING?!"

The guild fell silent. Dozens of heads turned toward him.

"…Did this brat just call the Master an old man?" someone muttered.

He shouted again, hopping onto a table for good measure. "OYYYEE!DON'T PLAY DEAD, OLD MAN! I CAME ALL THIS WAY TO JOIN!"

And then, from the stairwell, a woman appeared. She was rubbing her eyes lazily, like someone disturbed from a long nap. Her hair was dark, flowing down her back, her eyes scarlet like burning rubies.

Her voice was low and dangerous. “Who…the hell… is this idiot making noise in my guild?”

The boy pointed at her without hesitation. “Oi, lady! Have you seen the guild master? Where’s the geezer hiding? What hole is he sitting in?”

The entire guild gasped.

SMACK!

Her hand landed squarely on his head, nearly cracking the table beneath him.

“WHO’S THE IDIOT CALLING ME OLD?!” she shouted, dragging him into a headlock.

“WHAT THE HELL, LADY?!” the boy cried, flailing. “I just asked a question!”

“AND YOU GOT AN ANSWER!” she yelled, hitting him again for good measure.

The guild erupted into laughter. “Hah! Look at the brat! Master’s gonna kill him!”

The boy broke free, rubbing his sore head. “I’m not a punching bag, damn it! Who even are you?!”

She smirked. “I should ask you the same, brat. Why are you making a scene in my guild?”

“Because,” he shouted proudly, “I want to join Sylax! I’m going to be the world’s strongest adventurer!”

The hall went quiet again. Scarlett—because the woman was none other than Scarlett, the Guild Master herself—raised a brow. “And why Sylax?”

The boy’s face softened as he spoke. “When I was a kid… two adventurers from Sylax saved my life. I asked them why they weren’t afraid of death, and they said: Because we don’t fight for money—we fight for freedom, for thrill, for adventure. They said people call them wild, untamed… but they told me this guild was their home. From that day, I knew—I wanted to be like them. And I’ve trained every day since, just so I could stand here.”

Scarlett studied him. Then, to everyone’s surprise, she smiled. “I like your guts,kid. Souls like yours belong in Sylax.”

She turned to Akira. “Oi. Give him the form.”

Akira bowed. “As you wish, Master.”

The boy froze. “…Wait. MASTER?!” He pointed at Scarlett, eyes wide. “You’re the Guild Master?!”

The hall burst into laughter. Someone shouted, “He thought the Master was an old man with a beard!”

Scarlett tilted her head, smirking. “Disappointed?”

The boy blinked, muttered under his breath, “I mean, yeah… I imagined some geezer with a big moustache…”

CRACK! A mug flew at his face, leaving the imprint of its rim across his nose.

“CALL ME OLD AGAIN AND I’LL BURY YOU!” Scarlett roared, while half the guild held her back.

“WHY ARE YOU SO VIOLENT, GRANNY?!” the boy yelled, laughing despite the swelling on his face.

That nearly caused a riot—half the guild fell out of their chairs laughing, the other half rushed to stop Scarlett before she actually killed him.

Finally, Akira slid him a form. “Quickly, fill this before Master gets free.”

The boy scribbled his name with dramatic flair. “Shojin Takeru!”

Akira handed him a silver locket with a scarlet crystal—the mark of Sylax.

Shojin clutched it to his chest, eyes blazing, then leapt into the air with a wild cheer. “WOOOHOOOO!I DID IT! I’M FINALLY A MEMBER OF SYLAX!”

The guild erupted in cheers. Someone slammed a keg onto the table. “Drinks are on me! A new wild soul has joined the family!”

As the guild filled with music, laughter, and reckless joy, the shopkeeper across the street leaned against his stall, listening to the noise spill into the night.

“Ahh,” he muttered with a smile. “Another wild soul’s joined their ranks.”

And in the middle of the chaos, Shojin raised his mug high, his voice echoing above them all:

“I, Shojin Takeru, will be the world’s strongest adventurer! And it all begins here—with the Untamed Guild of Sylphania!”

The guild roared in approval.

Chapter 7 – First Mission: Goblin Clean-Up!

The calm morning in Sylax's guild hall was almost too serene for a place known for chaos. Scarlett lounged in her office, boots kicked up on the desk, half-asleep, when the guild request manager appeared, bowing stiffly.

"Master, there's a request… it's from the Guild Board of Sylphania. They've summoned all Guild Masters for an important meeting. It's in one week."

Scarlett yawned, rubbing her eyes. "All Guild Masters, huh? Sounds like politics… or trouble." She smirked, letting her crimson eyes linger on the letter. "Very well. Let's see what game they're playing this time."

Meanwhile, in the guild hall, Shojin Takeru, a seventeen-year-old with a reckless glint in his eye, was hunched over the Quest Board. He ran a finger across every sheet, muttering to himself.

"Umm… no… nope… maybe… nah…"

An older adventurer, leaning lazily against a pillar, chuckled. "First time choosing a quest, huh? Kiddo, let me help."

Shojin spun around. "Yes! I—I don't know which one to pick. There are too many!"

The adventurer pointed at a tattered parchment pinned near the bottom. "That one. Goblin extermination. Not too hard, but it'll test your strength and your courage."

Shojin's eyes widened. "Goblins? Perfect!" He grabbed the quest slip and bowed deeply. "Thank you, senpai!"

The man patted his head with a grin. "Don't worry. You're family now. Sylax has your back."

Shojin's heart raced as he tore through the guild hall like a comet. "Akira! Receptionist! I'm taking this quest!"

Before she could answer, he burst through the guild doors into the street, shouting with all the energy of a wildfire:
"MY FIRST MISSION! I'M COMING, GOBLINS!"

Even the townsfolk paused to watch. The shopkeeper next door chuckled, shaking his head. "So, that's the new soul of Sylax, eh? Wild from the first step."

Shojin ran across fields and winding paths, eyes sparkling with determination. The cave entrance where the goblin quest originated loomed before him. A foul stench of rot and dampness hit him, but he grinned wildly.

“Time to show what I’ve got! Shojin Takeru, adventurer of Sylax, doesn’t back down!”

Inside the cave, chaos awaited.

Goblin shrieks echoed off the stone walls. Small, vicious creatures with sharp teeth and crude weapons lunged at him. Shojin’s grin widened. “You guys don’t scare me!”

“Fire Fist!”

His fist ignited in flames, sweeping across a group of goblins and sending them flying. He leapt over rocks, weaving between attacks, striking down goblin after goblin. Each explosion of flame and fist slammed into the ground, creating a rhythm of destruction.

But for every goblin he felled, three more appeared from the shadows. Their snarls and squeals filled the cavern like a dark symphony.

Shojin’s muscles burned, sweat dripping down his brow, his chest heaving. Yet his grin never faltered. “Is that all you’ve got? I’m just getting started!”

He unleashed another flurry of fire punches, spinning and flipping through the swarm, but fatigue began to creep in. His arms trembled. He wiped blood from his lip. “Hah… they’re… endless…”

And then…

The air grew cold. The cavern seemed to darken. The goblins froze mid-step, their eyes wide in fear. Shojin’s grin faltered. A massive shadow spread across the cavern floor.

He spun around slowly.

There it was. Towering above him, muscles rippling under blackened skin, jagged bone and iron armor covering its massive frame. Its eyes glowed crimson, burning like coals, and its jagged cleaver was larger than Shojin himself.

The Dark Goblin Chief.

Shojin froze. Every hair on his body stood on end. The sheer size and presence of the creature made his stomach churn with a mixture of fear and exhilaration.

“…Oh… crap.”

The Dark Goblin Chief let out a guttural roar, shaking the cave walls and sending debris raining down. The goblins behind it cowered, but it was clear: this was a threat beyond his current limits.

Shojin clenched his fists, fire flickering around his knuckles. He gritted his teeth, a wild spark of determination in his eyes.

“Okay… Shojin Takeru… first mission… and first REAL challenge. Bring it on!"

Can the rookie adventurer survive his first real test, or will he need backup from a hidden Sylax member?

Chapter 8 – Shojin vs. Dark Goblin Chief

The cavern pulsed with a suffocating weight, every flicker of torchlight swallowed by the vast shadows cast by jagged stone. Shojin's chest rose and fell in ragged bursts, his fists trembling as flames licked weakly across his knuckles. The echoes of his earlier clashes still clung to the air—the burnt stink of scorched goblin flesh, the blackened marks across the cave walls.

But this… this was different.

The Dark Goblin Chief towered before him, skin tough as iron bark, muscles layered like stone, and crimson eyes burning with a twisted hunger. Its guttural growl rolled like thunder through the cavern, shaking Shojin's bones.

Shojin swallowed hard, forcing a grin despite the blood running from his lip.
"You're big, ugly, and loud… but I'll bring you down."

His fists ignited—Fire Fists!—he charged, striking with a flurry of blazing punches. Each impact burst with sparks, illuminating the cave in violent flashes. The goblin chief staggered a step, but its jagged blade came down like a mountain, scraping the ground, forcing Shojin to leap aside.

He flipped mid-air, his heel igniting—Fire Kick! The burning strike smashed across the goblin's face, snapping its head to the side. The smell of charred flesh filled the cavern. The chief snarled but didn't fall.

Shojin skidded back, clenching his teeth. "Tch… still standing? Then take this—!"

A sphere of fire roared into being between his hands—Fireball! He hurled it with all his might. The explosion thundered through the cavern, stones cracking, rubble raining down as flames engulfed the monster.

For a moment, Shojin thought he had won. His breathing hitched, his legs trembling.

Then the fire cleared.

The Dark Goblin Chief stepped forward, armor cracked, skin blistered, but its grin wider than ever. The beast only looked angrier.

Shojin's stomach dropped. "You've got to be kidding me…"

The goblin slammed its cleaver into the ground and let out a roar so powerful it ripped through the cavern like a shockwave. Rocks exploded, dust swallowed the air, and Shojin was hurled backward, his body slamming against stone. His vision blurred. His ears rang. He fell to one knee, coughing blood.

“Oh no… not now… not—”

His limbs trembled violently, exhaustion tearing through every fiber of his body. His flames sputtered, weaker, dimmer. His muscles screamed in agony.

The goblin chief, meanwhile, marched forward, each footstep booming like a war drum. The massive weapon it carried scraped against the stone, throwing sparks with every drag. Its laughter echoed—a guttural, twisted sound that filled the cavern with dread.

Shojin tried to stand. His body refused.

The goblin’s shadow swallowed him whole as it raised its weapon high. The cavern seemed to shrink around them, silence broken only by the goblin’s ragged breathing and Shojin’s desperate gasps.

As the blade hovered, ready to cleave him in two, Shojin’s life unspooled before him in flashes:

—His mother’s warm smile, reaching out her hands.
—His father’s steady voice, teaching him courage.
—The Sylax adventurers who once dragged him from death’s jaws, telling him he was worth saving.
—The grueling days of training, fists blistered, bones aching, fire that refused to ignite until he pushed past despair.

All of it, all he had fought for, led to this single moment.

But his arms wouldn’t move. His fists wouldn’t rise. His body had reached its limit.

Tears welled in the corners of his eyes—not from fear, but from rage at his own weakness.

The goblin chief bellowed triumphantly, its weapon drawing back, veins bulging as it prepared the killing strike.

Shojin’s heart hammered against his ribs. His breath caught. The world slowed.

“…Am I… going to die… here?”

The blade began its descent.
Shojin’s eyes widened.
And then—
Darkness.

Chapter 9 – The Rescue of Shojin Takeru!

The Dark Goblin Chief's blade cut through the air, a blur of death. Shojin shut his eyes tight, bracing for the end.

This is it… I couldn't do it… I'm going to die—

CLANG!!!

The sound of steel meeting steel rang like a thunderclap through the cavern. Sparks burst in every direction, briefly painting the walls with light. The goblin's jagged cleaver was frozen mid-swing, stopped by a gleaming longsword.

Shojin's eyes snapped open. His breath caught in his throat. "…Am I… alive?"

A tall man stood between him and the looming monster, back straight, one hand steady on his sword. His aura radiated control, power, and confidence.

"Not today, kid," the man said, his deep voice steady.

Shojin's heart pounded as four more figures appeared from the shadows, stepping into the faint light. Their presence filled the cavern, not with fear, but with strength. They moved as if they had done this a thousand times before.

Shojin's jaw dropped. An adventuring party… here?

The battle turned in an instant.

The leader pressed forward, his sword clashing with the chief's blade in sharp, precise strikes. An archer loosed arrows that glowed with runes, each impact bursting in tiny explosions that forced the goblin back. The heavy fighter with a war hammer swung with terrifying force—each impact cracked the stone underfoot. Behind them, a healer traced glowing sigils into the air, threads of golden light knitting wounds and filling her comrades with renewed energy. And weaving between them all, the dual-blade fighter darted like lightning, carving lines of crimson across the monster's hide.

Shojin could only watch, stunned. They're… perfect. Every move flows into the next. They don't even need to speak. They just know.

"Formation Delta!" the leader commanded.

The cavern erupted with motion. Arrows nailed the goblin's legs to the earth. The war hammer slammed against its guard, shattering its balance. Twin blades slashed deep across its torso, and the leader's sword blazed with white aura, cutting forward with unstoppable force.

"Fall!" he roared.

The Dark Goblin Chief let out a monstrous shriek that shook the walls before collapsing to the ground, its body trembling once before going still.

Defeated.

Shojin gasped, his chest heaving. The monster that nearly ended his life was slain in less than five minutes.

The cavern was silent except for the faint ringing of steel and Shojin's ragged breaths.

The leader slid his sword back into its sheath, then turned. His sharp eyes softened as they landed on Shojin. "You're alive, but barely. You're looking injured."

Shojin tried to reply, but his voice cracked.

Before he could, a girl rushed to his side. She knelt down, her satchel rattling with bottles and bandages. "Hold still. You're bleeding badly."

Her touch was gentle, her tone calm but commanding. She cleaned his wounds and wrapped him with practiced precision, each motion radiating care. A faint warmth seeped into his body as she pressed glowing herbs into the bandages, easing the pain.

Shojin blinked at her, surprised at how quickly the sharp ache dulled. "…Yeah. I feel… better. Thank you."

She smiled, brushing her hands off. "That's what I'm here for."

The leader crossed his arms. "Kiddo, what were you doing in here? Alone, no less?"

Shojin clenched his fists. His voice shook, but he forced the words out. "I… I was on a quest. My first mission." He bowed his head. "And thank you for saving me. I thought today… I was really going to die."

The heavy fighter with the hammer chuckled. "You've got guts, I'll give you that. But guts alone don't win fights. You need training. A mentor."

Shojin opened his mouth, but the girl beside him leaned forward, curiosity in her eyes. "What's your name, little guy?"

Despite the bandages and pain, Shojin straightened. He clenched his fist and raised it to the air.

“I am Shojin Takeru! Remember my name—because I’m going to be the world’s strongest and greatest adventurer!”

The cavern echoed with his voice. For a moment, the adventurers exchanged amused glances—smiles tugging at their lips.

“Well said,” the leader nodded.

Shojin tilted his head. “…But… why are you here?”

A memory flickered through their eyes. They had been returning from a quest nearby when they heard an explosion—the sound of Shojin’s fireball. Alarmed, they rushed toward the source. By the time they arrived, the boy was already on his knees, the goblin’s blade raised for the kill. The leader hadn’t hesitated. He had thrown himself into the strike, and the others followed.

Back in the present, the leader tapped his cheek. “Guess fate put us here at the right time.”

Shojin let out a shaky laugh. “So… you’re all adventurers?”

They all nodded with knowing smiles.

The dual-blade wielder’s eyes shifted, catching a gleam at Shojin’s chest. He raised an eyebrow. “That locket… the Sylax emblem.”

Shojin puffed out his chest proudly and gave a thumbs-up. “That’s right! I’m from Sylax Guild! The wildest guild in all of Sylphania!”

The adventurers laughed. The leader smirked, then offered his hand. “Then allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Isamu.”

He gestured to the healer. “She is Hinata.”

The hammer-wielder raised his weapon with a grin. “Hayate.”

The dual-blade fighter crossed his arms and smirked. “Yudai.”

And finally, the smallest of them all, a girl, leapt into the air and struck a dramatic pose. “And I am the one and only Pino!”

Shojin blinked. “…Pino?”

She grinned wide. “That’s right! Don’t forget it!”

The group moved together, raising their fists as one. Their voices echoed through the cavern, proud and powerful:
“We are the Crimson Fangs!”

Shojin’s jaw dropped. His heart almost stopped.

“C-Crimson Fangs!? No way! You’re one of the Top 10 Adventurer Parties of Sylphania!” His voice broke into a squeal. “I can’t believe it—this is unreal!”

The Crimson Fangs chuckled at his reaction, their eyes soft but proud.

“Believe it, kid,” Isamu said, placing a firm hand on Shojin’s shoulder. “Now, let’s get out of this cave. We’ll take proof of the kill back to the guild.”

Together, they harvested the goblin’s blackened core, storing it safely. Shojin, bandaged but standing tall, followed at their side.

For the first time since joining Sylax, Shojin didn’t feel alone.

As they began their journey back to town, Shojin’s chest swelled with pride. He had nearly died in his first mission, but instead of falling, he had been saved by legends.

And deep inside, he felt it:
This was only the beginning of his true adventure.

Chapter 10 – The Crimson Fangs of Sylax

The gates of Sylax loomed tall, their banners fluttering in the evening breeze. Shojin's heart swelled with relief and pride as he walked side by side with the Crimson Fangs.

"Thank you so much for walking with me all the way here," Shojin said, bowing slightly.

Issamu smirked, brushing it off. "Don't worry, kid. We were headed this way anyway."

Shojin blinked. "Wait—you were? No way! That's… awesome!"

The others chuckled at his wide-eyed amazement.

Together, they pushed open the great doors of the Sylax Guild. The hall inside was alive with chatter, clinking mugs, and laughter. But the moment the Crimson Fangs stepped in, the noise dipped. Heads turned. Conversations paused.

At the reception desk, Akira, the guild's ever-patient receptionist, looked up. Her eyes widened, then filled with tears.

"You're back…" she whispered. Then, with a sudden rush, she stood and bowed low. "Finally, you all returned! Do you have any idea how worried I've been? It's been a month! A whole month!"

Her voice cracked as tears slid down her cheeks.

Shojin's jaw nearly dropped to the floor. Wait… Akira knows them!?

Issamu stepped forward smoothly, his expression softening. He reached out, wiping away one of her tears with his thumb.

"Now, now," he said in a silky tone. "Don't cry. These wild souls never forget their home… and never forget you."

Akira froze, her cheeks turning pink. She swatted his hand away, flustered. "S-Shut up! You reckless idiot—you could've been dead out there!"

The guild hall erupted in whistles and laughter. Someone shouted, "Still flirting even after near-death, huh, Issamu?!"

Shojin stood stiff as a board, his mouth hanging open. WHAT is happening right now!?

He pointed dramatically at Akira. “A-Akira! How do you even know them!? I mean—I know they’re the Crimson Fangs, one of the Top Ten, but… they’re not even from Sylax, right? Right!?”

For a moment, silence. Then—

The entire guild burst out laughing, nearly falling off chairs. Mugs spilled. Even the Crimson Fangs doubled over.

Shojin’s face flushed bright red. “Wh-what!? Did I say something dumb again!?”

Pino hopped onto a table, wagging her finger at him. “Oh, sweet little Shojin… you’re not the only untamed soul here.”

Shojin blinked. “…Wait. You mean—”

Yudai smirked, arms crossed. “That’s right, kid. We’re Sylax-born and raised.”

Shojin froze. His eyes bulged. “NO. WAY. THAT CAN’T BE TRUE!”

The guild laughed even harder, pounding tables.

Pino threw her arms wide. “Believe it or not, we are Sylax’s Crimson Fangs, baby!”

Shojin staggered backward, clutching his head. “M-my brain can’t process this right now…”

Before anyone could tease him further, a sharp voice cut through the chaos.

“Well, well. Look who finally decided to crawl home.”

The guild hushed instantly.

Scarlett, the guild master herself, strode in, her scarlet coat flowing behind her, eyes sharp as blades.

Her gaze landed on the Crimson Fangs. “Took you long enough. I was starting to think you’d abandoned your own guild.”

The five adventurers straightened and bowed in unison. “Yes, Master. Sorry, Master. We’re late.”

Shojin glanced between them, his head spinning. Wait—THE Crimson Fangs… bowing like scolded kids!?

Scarlett’s eyes then snapped to him. “And you. Shojin. What are you doing with them?”

Shojin pointed at himself nervously. “Uh… Nothing? Granny, they just saved me from—”

SMASH!

A mug flew across the room and shattered against Shojin's face, beer dripping down his hair.

"HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU NOT TO CALL ME GRANNY!?" Scarlett roared.

The guild erupted in howling laughter, tables shaking as adventurers clutched their stomachs. Even Pino fell off her perch, kicking her legs as she cackled.

Shojin wiped beer from his eyes, groaning. "Why is it always the mug…?"

Scarlett huffed, then turned back to the Crimson Fangs, her expression shifting into something more serious. "After you've rested, report to my office. All of you. Including Shojin."

With that, she stormed off, her boots clicking against the wooden floor, leaving a trail of silence behind her.

For a heartbeat, the guild hall was quiet. Then laughter erupted again, louder than before.

Shojin slumped into a chair, head in his hands. "This guild is insane…"

The Crimson Fangs grinned at him, and Issamu clapped his shoulder.

"Welcome home, kid."

Chapter 11: The Fading Wind

The polished oak door to Scarlett's office felt like the gateway to another world—a silent, heavy world far removed from the raucous laughter of the guild hall. Shojin fidgeted, the bandages on his arm itching. Beside him, the Crimson Fangs stood at relaxed attention, a stark contrast to his nervous energy. Isamu gave a single, firm knock.

"Come in," Scarlett's voice, uncharacteristically flat, came from within.

They filed into the spacious office. It was less a place of paperwork and more a lived-in arsenal. Ancient maps yellowed with age were pinned to the walls alongside mounted monster skulls and elegantly crafted weapons on display racks. Scarlett sat behind a large desk made of dark wood, one leg propped up on it, but the usual lazy amusement was gone from her crimson eyes. They were sharp, calculating, fixed on them.

She didn't offer them a seat. The silence stretched, thick and uncomfortable, broken only by the faint crackle of the fireplace.

"Shojin," she said, her voice cutting through the quiet. "Start. From the beginning. How did you end up in a cave with them?" Her gaze flicked to the Fangs.

Shojin straightened his back, wincing slightly at a twinge of pain. "I—I took a goblin extermination quest from the board! I defeated a bunch of them, no problem! There were… a lot. But I was handling it!" He puffed his chest out, then deflated slightly. "And then… I felt it. A heavy breath on my neck. The air went cold. All the little goblins, they just… froze."

He shuddered, the memory vivid. "When I turned around… there it was. It wasn't like the others. It was huge, darker than shadow, with eyes like burning coals. It… it wasn't just strong. It felt… evil. I fought. I used everything I had. But it was like my fire was nothing. I was on my knees. I thought I was done for." He looked at the Fangs, genuine gratitude in his eyes. "And then they were there. They saved me."

Scarlett's expression didn't change. She slowly turned her head toward Isamu. "Your turn. A 'weird dark goblin' doesn't cover it. What was it?"

Isamu met her gaze steadily. "A Dark Goblin Chief, Master. We confirmed it after the fact. Its core was blackened, pulsating with a malice we haven't seen in these lands for centuries."

Scarlett's booted foot slid off the desk and hit the floor with a soft thud. She stood up, her movements unnervingly smooth and silent. "A Dark Goblin Chief," she repeated, her voice low and dangerous. "Isamu. Those creatures are not native to Sylphania. They are abominations from the blighted lands outside the barrier. They cannot simply wander in. Explain."

"I cannot, Master," Isamu admitted, his own voice grave. "But it is the truth. We saw it. We put it down."

Scarlett's knuckles were white where she gripped the edge of her desk. She slowly sat back down, the chair groaning under her weight. Her eyes were distant, seeing not the room, but some terrible memory. "You were a month overdue. This was the reason? You ran into more of them?"

Hinata stepped forward slightly, her usual cheerful demeanor replaced by a somber professionalism. "That is the bad news we must report, Master. Our journey back was not delayed by mere distance. We were waylaid. Constantly. Packs of Shadow Wolves with obsidian fangs. A Corrupted Terrestris that bled acid. Creatures that should not, that cannot, exist within our borders. The wildlands are… sickening. The further we traveled, the thicker the darkness became. The quest boards in the outer territories are overflowing with extermination requests. The guards are overwhelmed."

Isamu nodded. "The natural order is fracturing. Something is wrong. Deeply wrong."

Scarlett leaned back, steepling her fingers under her chin. The firelight cast deep shadows across her face, making her seem both ancient and terrifyingly present. The office was utterly silent for what felt like an eternity, the weight of their report pressing down on them all. Shojin held his breath, understanding the gravity but not the full history behind it.

Finally, she spoke, her voice a soft, chilling whisper. "So. That's why."

Pino, unable to bear the tension, blurted out, "That's why what, Master? Why the summons?"

Scarlett's crimson eyes focused, and she looked at each of them in turn, her gaze finally landing on the window, towards the distant, shimmering heart of the kingdom. "The Guild Board didn't summon us for politics. They summoned us because the winds are fading."

Shojin blinked. "The… winds? What does that mean?"

Scarlett turned her head, and for the first time, they saw a look in her eyes that none of them had ever witnessed: not anger, not annoyance, but a profound, weary dread. Her voice, when she spoke, was low and carried the weight of ten thousand years.

"It means, you fool boy, that the barrier is failing." She let the words hang in the air, allowing their horrific implication to sink in. "The divine wind barrier that has encased and protected Sylphania since its founding. The one that keeps the true horrors of the outside world at bay. It was woven from a sacrifice of immense power, and it has held for millennia. But now… it's growing thin. It's fracturing. And those things," she pointed a sharp finger toward the door, toward the world outside, "are just the beginning. The first drops of rain before the storm."

She stood up again, this time with a purpose that filled the room with electric intensity. "The board isn't planning a meeting.They are sounding the alarm. They are gathering every able-bodied fighter, every guild, every ounce of strength this kingdom has left because we are not looking at a few rogue monster sightings." She slammed her palm on the desk, making everyone jump.

“We are staring down the throat of a war for survival.A war we haven’t had to fight in ten thousand years.”

She looked at the stunned faces of the Crimson Fangs and the utterly bewildered Shojin.
“You wanted to know why you’re here?This concerns every soul in Sylphania, but it concerns my guild first. We are the untamed. We are the ones who operate where others fear to tread. We are the first and last line of defense when order fails.”
Her gaze was iron.
“The five of you,”she commanded, pointing at the Crimson Fangs, “are to be ready to move at dawn. And you,” her eyes fell on Shojin, seeing his raw potential and his terrifying naivety. “You just had a taste of the real world. Consider your training accelerated. You’re coming with us. You will see what it truly means to face an enemy that wants to erase our world.”

The group stood in stunned silence. The cheerful chaos of the guild hall felt a universe away. They weren't just going to a meeting. They were marching to a war council.

And as they looked at their master, they saw not just the wild, beer-soaked leader of Sylax, but a figure of immense, grim resolve, her scarlet eyes burning with the fire of a memory of a war she should never have had to see again. A secret history, known only to her, pressed down upon her shoulders, making her seem taller, older, and infinitely more dangerous.

No one in that room could have possibly guessed that the barrier they spoke of failing was woven by her own twin sister. The weight on Scarlett Yami’s soul was the weight of a legend—her family’s legend—beginning to crumble.

Chapter 12: The Road to the Conclave

The morning sun shone brightly on the chaotic farewell unfolding outside the Sylax guild hall. It was less a solemn send-off and more a rowdy festival. Adventurers spilled out onto the street, mugs of morning ale in hand, shouting advice, jokes, and poorly-concealed concerns.

“Don’t let those fancy guild masters push you around, Master!” “Isamu!Try not to flirt with the entire royal guard!” “Pino!No stealing the king’s cutlery!” “Hayate!If they offer you a seat, check if it’s reinforced first!” “Shojin!Try not to pick a fight with a statue this time!”

Shojin, beaming with pride at being included, waved wildly at everyone, his earlier near-death experience forgotten in the thrill of a new adventure. The Crimson Fangs took the good-natured ribbing in stride, laughing and shouting back insults.

Scarlett stood at the center of it all, one hand on her hip, doing a quick headcount. “Alright, let’s get this circus on the road. Hinata, Yudai, Hayate, Pino… Shojin…” Her eyes narrowed. She counted again. “…Where in the blazes is my captain?”

Inside the guild hall, the noise faded to a distant rumble. At the reception desk, Isamu leaned against it, a charming, lazy smile on his face. Akira was trying very hard to look busy with a stack of quest permits, but a faint blush was creeping up her neck.

“...so you’ll hold down the fort?” Isamu said, his voice a low, smooth murmur. “Keep the wild beasts from burning the place down while I’m gone?”

Akira refused to look up, focusing intently on her stamp. “Someone has to do the actual work around here. Try not to get yourselves killed. It would create… an unacceptable amount of paperwork for me.”

Isamu chuckled, leaning a little closer. “Oh, I’ll be back. I still owe you for that drink you promised me after the last mission. Wouldn’t want to leave a debt unpaid.”

Now she looked up, her professional facade cracking into a flustered scowl. “I promised no such thing! You spilled ale on my ledger and said, ‘Sorry, I’ll buy you a drink to make up for it!’ That is not a promise, that is a cleanup fee!”

“Sounded like a promise to me,” he said, his grin widening. “The way you blushed—”

THWACK!

A heavy book, hurled with pinpoint accuracy, smacked Isamu squarely on the back of the head. He stumbled forward, nearly crashing into the desk.

“OW! What in the—?”

Standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the morning sun and tapping her foot impatiently, was Scarlett. Her expression was a perfect blend of annoyance and amusement.

“Oi, Romeo! The fate of the kingdom is supposedly hanging in the balance, and you’re here trying to schedule a date? We’re leaving. Now. Your epic love story can survive a week without you sighing over her ledger.”

Akira’s face turned a brilliant shade of scarlet that rivaled Scarlett’s coat. “M-Master! It’s not—! He was just—!”

“Save it, Akira. I need him functional, not lovesick.” Scarlett grabbed Isamu by the collar and began dragging him towards the door. “Come on, Casanova. Your public awaits.”

Isamu shot a last, laughing look back at a mortified Akira. “Save that drink for me!”

“I’LL INK YOUR BEAST SLAYING PERMITS IN PINK!” she yelled after him, before burying her face in her hands as the entire guild hall, who had witnessed the entire exchange through the open door, erupted in howling laughter.

And so, the Untamed Guild’s delegation finally set off, the sounds of their guild’s cheers and laughter following them down the road.

The journey to the capital was anything but quiet.

True to form, the group was a magnet for chaos. Pino, in a fit of boredom, used her illusions to make it look like a giant chicken was chasing Hayate down the road, causing the large man to yell and swing his hammer at thin air until he tripped into a mud puddle.

Shojin, eager to prove his worth, tried to forage for berries and accidentally stumbled into a bee’s nest, leading to a frantic, shrieking sprint through a field with the entire group running for cover. Yudai had to use his dual blades to literally slice the air, creating a wind current to divert the angry swarm.

At one point, they passed a merchant’s cart selling roasted nuts. Hayate’s stomach growled loud enough to startle the birds from the trees. Before anyone could stop him, he’d bought the entire cart—nuts, roasting pan, and a very confused merchant—insisting it was “essential supplies for the road.” They had to spend ten minutes convincing the man to take his cart back.

Through it all, Scarlett watched with a mix of exasperation and fondness. This was her family. This chaotic, unpredictable, hilarious mess was what they were fighting for.

“Hey, Granny Scarlett?” Shojin asked, munching on a handful of the nuts Hayate had thankfully paid for. “This capital place… is it big?”

“It’s the heart of Sylphania, you idiot,” Pino chirped, skipping ahead. “Of course it’s big!”

“Bigger than you can possibly imagine, kid,” Isamu said, rubbing the back of his head where the book had hit him. “Towers that scratch the sky, streets so clean you could eat off them, and more rules than you’ve had hot meals.”

Shojin’s eyes went wide. “Whoa….”

“Try not to gawk too obviously,” Hinata advised gently. “And maybe… try to be quiet? Just for a little while?”

Shojin nodded seriously, a determined look on his face. “I can be quiet. I’ll be the quietest adventurer you’ve ever seen.”

He lasted approximately three minutes before seeing a street performer and yelling, “WOW! LOOK AT THAT! CAN I DO THAT?!” shattering the calm of a previously peaceful town square.

Scarlett just sighed, a small smile playing on her lips. "Yeah. Good luck with that."

After days of walking, bickering, laughing, and causing minor incidents across the countryside, the road began to widen, paved with smooth, white stone. The traffic increased, with merchants, guards, and other armed groups all heading in the same direction.

And then, they saw it.

The road crested a great hill, and there it lay spread out before them in the valley below: the Capital of Sylphania. It wasn't just a city; it was a masterpiece. Gleaming white spires pierced the clouds, adorned with banners fluttering in the high wind. Cascading terraces of homes and shops were built into the hillside, connected by elegant bridges. And surrounding it all, immense walls of polished stone, shining in the afternoon sun.

But it was the gates that stole their breath. They were colossal, forged from enchanted silver and gold, depicting the legendary figures of the Covenant Order in intricate relief. They were open, but the sight was daunting. Guards in pristine armor stood at attention, their gazes sharp and assessing every group that approached.

The chaotic energy of the Sylax group vanished, replaced by a shared, sobering awe. Even Scarlett’s playful smirk was gone, her crimson eyes reflecting the gleaming city, her expression unreadable.

Shojin finally managed to be quiet, his jaw hanging open. “Whoa…”

Isamu whistled softly. “Never gets old.”

“Right,” Scarlett said, her voice regaining its command. She straightened her coat and rolled her shoulders. “The fun’s over. Time to go impress a bunch of stuffed shirts. Try to look… slightly less untamed for five minutes.”

She started walking down the hill towards the magnificent, intimidating gates, her guild following in her wake, a splash of chaotic color approaching a world of perfect order. The real test was about to begin.

Chapter 13: The Grand Conclave

The Grand Conclave Hall was a spectacle of opulent power. Sunlight streamed through towering stained-glass windows depicting the heroic deeds of the Covenant Order, casting kaleidoscopic colors on the assembled guild masters. They were a sea of polished armor, elegant robes, and smug superiority, each representing guilds with names like "Celestial Vanguard" and "Adamant Aegis." Their rankings—1st, 5th, 12th—were displayed on their pauldrons like badges of honor.

And then, there was Sylax.

The doors creaked open, and the Untamed Guild of Sylphania strode in. Scarlett led the way, her posture a lazy slouch that screamed indifference, her crimson coat a violent splash of color in the monochrome of formality. Behind her, the Crimson Fangs moved with the relaxed confidence of predators in a zoo full of preening birds. And Shojin, wide-eyed and gaping, practically vibrated with nervous energy, his new Sylax locket gleaming proudly on his chest.

A wave of whispers immediately rippled through the hall. “...Sylax?What are they doing here?” “Thelowest-ranked guild? This is a conclave for the elite.” “Look at them.They look like they just crawled out of a tavern brawl.” “Probably did.Disgraceful.”

Scarlett’s ear twitched, but her smirk never faltered. She didn’t even look at the whisperers. “Ignore the buzzing flies,” she murmured to her team, her voice barely audible. “They’re just noise.”

They found a space to stand near the middle of the hall, a deliberate act of defiance that drew more scowls. As they settled, a lithe figure seemingly materialized from the shadows beside them. It was an elf, his silver hair perfectly coiffed, his green robes immaculate. A pin on his collar marked him as Lunaris, Master of the 30th-ranked Silent Daggers.

He didn’t even glance at Scarlett. His eyes, full of avaricious glee, were fixed on the Crimson Fangs. “Isamu,”Lunaris said, his voice a silken, condescending whisper. “A waste of true talent. You and your team. Stuck in that… place.” He gestured dismissively at Scarlett. “Join the Silent Daggers. Our resources are limitless. Our reputation, pristine. We can pay you ten times whatever she scrapes together from bar fights.”

Isamu didn’t turn his head. His response was a flat, cold monotone. “The Fangs aren’t for sale. We belong to Sylax.”

Lunaris’s smile tightened. “A foolish sentiment. You’ll die penniless and unknown with her.” He melted back into the crowd, joining a group of other high-ranked masters who chuckled, their insults now barely concealed.

“...probably only got in because they clean the latrines…” “...should be thrown out for dress code violations alone…”

Shojin’s hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, his face flushing with anger. “Why won’t they shut—” Hinata’s hand was suddenly on his arm,her grip firm but gentle. She didn’t look at him, her serene gaze fixed ahead. “Patience, Shojin. Barking dogs rarely bite. And we are not here to fight them. We are here to outlast them.” Her calm was a soothing balm. The entire Sylax team stood, a bastion of unshakable calm in a storm of petty insults.

The main doors at the front of the hall swung open with a resonant boom, silencing the crowd. The Guild Board, a council of seven elderly and severe-looking individuals, filed in and took their seats on a raised dais.

“Silence,” the central figure, an ancient dwarf with a beard woven with gems, intoned. His voice, though quiet, carried absolute authority.

Another board member, a stern-faced human woman, stood. “Let me tell you why we have summoned all guild masters.” She paused, letting the tension build. “As we all know, thousands of years ago, the Covenant Order built Sylphania. In the month of its founding, the heart of our nation, the founder Lady Sylph, died. With her final breath, she wove a divine wind barrier around our kingdom, a shield that has protected us from the horrors of the outside world ever since.”

At the mention of her sister’s death, Scarlett’s casual slouch vanished. She didn’t move a muscle, but her crimson eyes fixed on the speaker, glazing over slightly. In her mind, she wasn't in a stuffy hall; she was on a balcony, watching the light fade from her twin’s eyes, feeling the unimaginable power surge and then settle into an invisible dome over the world. The memory was a fresh wound, even after ten millennia. She tapped her forehead gently, a silent gesture to a sister no one else knew she had. I know, Sylph. I remember.

The board member continued, her voice growing graver. “We are here today because that barrier… is weakening.”

A collective gasp sucked the air from the room. Scarlett’s internal whisper—As I thought—was lost in the sudden panic.

“The evidence is undeniable. The exponential increase in extermination quests. The appearance of darker, more corrupted beasts that should not exist within our borders. Our seers have analyzed the flows of magic. The barrier is decaying. We estimate that within one year, it will shatter completely.”

Pandemonium erupted. Masters shouted questions, voices laced with fear and denial. “A year?!” “How is this possible?!” “What do we do?!”

Throughout the chaos, the Sylax group remained silent and still. They had lived this truth. They weren't afraid; they were confirmed.

As the noise reached a fever pitch, one of the other board members, a figure who had been shrouded in a deep hooded cloak, stood. With a graceful movement, she threw the cloak back.

The hall fell into a stunned, dead silence.

Her hair was the color of moonlight, her ears elegantly pointed, and her eyes held the ancient wisdom of the stars. She was ethereally beautiful and radiated an aura of immense power. The emblem on her chest was not of the Guild Board, but a forgotten symbol known only from history books: the crest of the Covenant Order.

“L-Lady Lina…?” someone stammered. “The Light Elf Archer of the Covenant Order?!” “She’s alive?!” “Why is she here?How?”

Lina’s voice, when she spoke, was melodic yet carried the weight of ages. It effortlessly filled the silent hall. She ignored everyone else, her gaze laser-focused on one person.

“Sylax,” she said.

Every head in the room swiveled to look at the disreputable guild from the bottom of the rankings.

Scarlett, looking utterly bored, raised a single eyebrow. “Yes?”

A faint, knowing smile touched Lina’s lips. “So, I finally found you, Scarlett.”

The whisper that went through the crowd this time was one of pure, unadulterated shock. They know each other? How does a legend know the master of the lowest guild?

Scarlett’s smirk returned. “I think I knew about the fading wind before your seers even felt a draft.”

The masters were utterly bewildered. Lunaris looked like he’d been slapped.

“We missed you,” Lina said, her voice softening with a genuine warmth that stunned the assembly. “It has been a while since our last meeting. But I see you found the freedom and adventure you always wanted.”

“Yes,” Scarlett replied casually, as if chatting with an old friend over tea. “I think I did.”

Lina’s smile widened. “I always thought the wildest guild in Sylphania would have the wildest master. It seems I was right.”

Scarlett gave a single, acknowledging nod.

The entire Conclave was leaning forward, trying to process the impossible conversation unfolding before them.

“I am here,” Lina continued, her tone shifting back to seriousness, “because I have a task for you.” The air grew thick. “As you know… Lydia and Zohan are dead.”

A shadow passed over Scarlett’s face. “Yes.”

“I want you to train their descendant.”

Another wave of shock. Descendant?

“His name is Kokan Tohei. He is… difficult. Cold. Rude. He has not left his family’s estate since his parents died when he was seven. He has a young sister in primary school whom he fiercely protects. He is now eighteen, and he speaks to no one.” Lina paused. “But he is unimaginably strong. He inherited his grandmother Lydia’s power of water manipulation and his grandfather Zohan’s supreme swordsmanship and physical prowess. But he is a storm contained in a bottle of grief. After they died… the light in him went out. I want you to help him. I want you to show him what freedom, life, and adventure can look like.”

The request was met with stunned silence. Then, Scarlett, in her most dramatic, casual style, waved a hand dismissively.

“Sorry, Lina. I’m busy.”

The hall exploded. “SHE DENIED LADY LINA?!” “Is she an idiot?!” “The honor!The prestige!”

Lina, however, wasn’t offended. She looked… expectant. “I knew you would say that. But I ask this not for me. It was Lydia’s last wish. She wanted her only descendants to be trained by you. To live with you, if need be.”

Scarlett’s flippant mask slipped for a microsecond. She looked away from Lina, her eyes lifting toward the ceiling as if she could see through it to the sky beyond. In her mind, she could hear Lydia’s laughter, see Zohan’s steadfast smile. So that was your wish, my old friends? She let out a long, dramatic sigh that echoed in the silent hall.

“Ugh. Fine.” She looked back at Lina, her expression one of utter exasperation. “But only for the sake of Zohan and Lydia. Send him to Sylax. Don’t expect me to coddle him.”

Lunaris finally found his voice, stepping forward, outraged. “Lady Lina! With all due respect, I will be the best master for him! Or anyone else! Not this… this loser!”

Lina turned her ancient, placid eyes toward him. “You are wrong, Guild Master Lunaris.” Her gaze swept the entire room, leaving no doubt. “In all of Sylphania, there is no one stronger than Scarlett.”

The declaration landed like a physical blow. Jaws hit the floor. Eyes bulged. The masters of the top-ranked guilds looked as if they’d been told the sky was green. Shojin’s dramatic gasp

was the loudest sound in the room, his hands flying to his mouth. The Crimson Fangs, however, simply crossed their arms and smirked, their expressions screaming, ‘We’ve known all along.’

Scarlett just rolled her eyes. “Oi, Lina. At 7 tonight. Capital gates. Have him there. Don’t be late.” The casual command to a living legend was breathtaking.

Lunaris sputtered, “But Lady Lina! She doesn’t even respect you!”

Lina merely smiled. “Huh? The meeting is dismissed.” And before anyone could utter another word, she dissolved into a shower of golden light, teleporting away.

The hall remained frozen in a state of collective shock and disbelief. The silence was broken only by the sound of Scarlett stretching lazily.

“Well, that was boring. Let’s go get some real food. I’m starving.” She turned and began walking out, her team falling in behind her, leaving a room full of the most powerful people in the kingdom utterly bewildered and whispering the same question over and over:

“Who… who is she really?”

Chapter 14: The Wildest Guild Gains a Legend's Heir

Back in the opulent halls of the capital, the air was thick not with fear of the impending crisis, but with bewildered gossip. Lunaris, the elf master of the Silent Daggers, paced before a small council of other high-ranking guild masters.

"It makes no sense!" he hissed, his composure shattered. "Why would Lady Lydia and Lord Zohan, paragons of the Covenant Order, entrust their sole heir to... to her? How do they even know her? A low-ranked guild master who dresses like a tavern brawler!"

A dwarven master from the Stone Fist guild grumbled into his beard. "There's a history there. Something hidden. Did you see how Lady Lina spoke to her? Like an equal. Like an old friend."

"Strongest in Sylphania?" a human master from the Golden Vanguard scoffed. "Preposterous. It's a ruse. She must have some hold over them, some blackmail from a past life."

Lunaris stopped his pacing, a cold glint in his eye. "She is hiding something. A secret identity, perhaps. A past she doesn't want anyone to remember. Whatever it is, it connects her directly to the founders. And I intend to find out what."

Meanwhile, as the sun began to dip below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple, a very different scene was unfolding at the capital's main gate.

Scarlett tapped her foot impatiently. "I'm bored. I'm hungry. And my guild hall is probably on fire by now because Akira's the only one with any sense left there."

Shojin was practically vibrating. "Do you think he'll be cool? Is he taller than me? Do you think he knows any cool water moves? Can I ask him to show me?"

Pino was using her illusions to make it look like Yudai had flowers growing out of his ears. Hinata was checking her medical satchel. "I have smelling salts ready, Master. Just in case."

"Good thinking," Scarlett muttered. "For both the unconsciousness and the smell of teenage arrogance."

At exactly 7:32 PM, the air shimmered with a golden light. Lady Lina materialized, her hand resting on the shoulder of a young man.

He was tall, with sharp, handsome features that were set in a permanent scowl. His hair was dark blue, like the deep ocean, and his eyes were a stormy grey, cold and distant. He wore

fine, dark traveling clothes that looked utterly impractical for adventure. This was Kokan Tohei.

Scarlett yawned, not even looking at him. "Hey Lina. You're late. I think we have to go without Kokan. Bye."

Kokan's scowl deepened. He shook off Lina's hand. "This is a waste of my time. I don't want to join the lowest-ranked guild in the kingdom. I want to be left alone. They're all clearly weaklings."

Before he could launch into another entitled tirade, Scarlett finally looked at him, a slow, dangerous smirk spreading across her face.

"Oh, kiddo," she said, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "Let's see what little power's making you so arrogant." She cracked her knuckles. "Let's make a deal. You and me. Right here, right now. If you win, I let you scamper back to your gloomy mansion. I don't take you." She leaned in and whispered, just loud enough for Lina to hear, "I also don't want a student, anyway."

Lina sighed. "The twist, Scarlett. You both use your full power. And my eyes are on you."

Scarlett's shoulders slumped in exaggerated disappointment. "Oh, Lina, you always do this. Ahhh, fine! Ruin my fun." She stretched lazily. "Okay, coldy. Let's dance."

The battle was less a fight and more a masterclass in humiliation. Kokan was powerful, there was no denying it. He summoned whips of water that could slice stone and launched spears of ice with deadly precision. The air grew cold and misty around him.

Scarlett didn't block a single attack. She didn't even summon her shadow magic. She just… moved. She leaned back to let a water whip pass millimeters from her nose, sidestepped an ice spear while examining her nails, and yawned as a wave of freezing water crashed harmlessly where she had been standing a second before.

"Fight me properly!" Kokan roared, his calm facade breaking, frustration turning his face red.

"Am I not?" Scarlett asked innocently, ducking under another attack. "I'm fighting the urge to take a nap. It's a real struggle."

Finally, seeing he was panting and spent, Scarlett decided the game was over. In a movement too fast for anyone to follow, she blurred forward and tapped him gently on the forehead with her index finger.

It wasn't a punch. It was a tap.

But it carried the concentrated force of a meteor strike. There was a soft thump of impacting energy, and Kokan's eyes rolled back into his head. He collapsed to the ground like a sack of potatoes, out cold.

The silence was absolute, broken only by the evening crickets.

Shojin's jaw was on the floor. "Sh-she… she just… with a finger…"

Lina patted his head gently. "That, kiddo, was about two percent of her power. Maybe three, if she was feeling generous."

Scarlett dusted off her hands. "Well, that was a thing. Time to go, Lina."

Lina smiled. "Okay then. Take care of him. Give him time to adjust. He's your responsibility now."

Scarlett gave a lazy nod. "Hayate. Carry-bag duty."

With a grunt, the massive hammer-wielder hoisted the unconscious Kokan onto his broad back like a rolled-up carpet.

And so, the wildest guild in Sylphania began its journey home, now with the unconscious heir of two legends in tow.

Two days passed. The journey was its usual chaotic self. Shojin tried to teach a squirrel to salute, Pino convinced a passing farmer that Hayate was a lost royal ogre, and Isamu had to stop Yudai from "negotiating" with a territorial bear by offering it a shiny rock.

Through it all, Kokan remained dead to the world, slung over Hayate's shoulder.

"Opsie," Scarlett said conversationally to Isamu as they walked. "I think I used a little extra power back there."

From beside them, Hinata shot her a scolding look. "Master! He is strong, but he's still a teenager! You didn't have to punch him into a two-day coma!"

Hayate grumbled, shifting the weight on his back. "Master, Yudai and I are carrying him again and again. Why does no one else get a turn?"

"Because you're my strong Fangs!" Scarlett said cheerfully, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world. "And your backs are the comfiest!"

Yudai, walking silently beside Hayate, just sighed in agreement.

It was then that a muffled groan came from Hayate's back. Then another. A hand twitched.

"Ugh… wha…?" a voice mumbled. "How is my bed moving…? Is there an earthquake…?"

Kokan's eyes fluttered open. He was staring at the ground moving beneath him, seeing two giant legs walking. He slowly, disorientedly, lifted his head.

His brain tried to process the scene: trees, a road, the back of a very large man, and a group of strangers laughing and chatting.

"WHAT!?!" he shouted, jerking violently. "WHERE AM I? WHO ARE YOU? AHHH!"

Scarlett didn't even turn around. "Ohh, the coldy is awake, huh?"

Hinata smiled. "I think so!"

Hayate practically wept with joy. "Finally! You're alive!" He and Yudai gratefully lowered Kokan onto his feet.

Isamu clapped a hand on his shoulder, steadying the wobbling boy. "Thank the gods. We were starting to think the Master had broken you for good."

Kokan shook his head, the memories flooding back. The fight. The humiliation. The finger. His face paled, then flushed with shame and anger. "I… I lost."

Scarlett finally turned, a wicked smirk on her face. "Ohh, coldy. Took you long enough to catch up."

Hayate stretched his back with a loud crack. "Where are we going? Home!"

Pino did a cartwheel. "Your new home! 'Cuz you're part of Sylax now!"

Shojin bounded over and threw an arm around Kokan's shoulders, who stiffened at the contact. "Welcome, buddy, to your new life! Let me introduce us! I am Shojin Takeru, the future strongest and greatest adventurer in all of Sylphania!"

Kokan stared at him, utterly baffled. "...!!!"

Pino struck a dramatic pose. "I am Pino! The youngest and most dazzling member of the Crimson Fangs!"

Isamu gave a casual salute. "Isamu. Captain."

The large man who had carried him thumbed his chest. "Hayate." The silent dual-wielder beside him just nodded. "Yudai."

Finally, Scarlett sauntered over. "And I'm the Guild Master. And your new sensei, coldy. As you know, I'm Scarlett. Scarlett of Sylax." She leaned in, her crimson eyes glinting. "Do whatever you want. Sleep all day, train all night, I don't care. But. Do. Not. Annoy. Me." She then turned to Shojin. "Shojin. You're with him. Keep an eye on him. You have to protect him. Understand?"

Shojin blinked. "Why me?"

"Because you're only a year younger, which means you're his designated annoying little brother and teammate. So take care of him."

A wide, brilliant grin spread across Shojin's face. He puffed out his chest, overflowing with pride at the responsibility. "I PROMISE YOU I WILL PROTECT HIM AND BE A GOOD CARETAKER AND—" he took a deep breath and yelled at the top of his lungs, "—THANK YOU SO MUCH, GRANNY!!!"

SMACK!

The sound of Scarlett's hand connecting with Shojin's face echoed through the forest. A perfect red handprint bloomed on his cheek.

The entire group, even the usually stoic Yudai, burst into laughter.

Kokan could only watch the chaos, utterly dumbfounded. He leaned slightly toward Hinata, who was giggling softly beside him, and whispered, "She is literally terrifying. How do you all live with her?"

Hinata wiped a tear from her eye, her smile warm and knowing. "You'll understand it soon enough, Kokan. Welcome to the family."

And as the mismatched group continued their chaotic journey home, with a stunned legend's heir in tow, the woods echoed with their laughter, their arguments, and the unmistakable, untamed spirit of Sylax.

Chapter 15: Return to Sylax: A Warning of Storm

The familiar, chaotic skyline of their town was a welcome sight. The Sylax guild hall stood like a slightly crooked, beloved old friend, its banner flapping proudly in the evening breeze. As Scarlett and her crew pushed open the doors, they were met with a wall of sound.

“THEY’RE BAAAAACK!” “MASTER!YOU’RE ALIVE!” “DID YOU BRING US ANY SOUVENIRS?LIKE, A ROYAL GUARD’S HELMET?!”

The guild hall erupted in a wave of cheers, clinking mugs, and general anarchy. A half-eaten roll flew through the air and smacked Hayate in the face, which he promptly ate with a grin. Scarlett smirked, a lazy, comfortable expression finally returning to her face. “Miss me, you pack of wild dogs?”

But one person was moving faster than the rest. Isamu’s eyes had instantly found Akira behind the reception desk. He weaved through the celebrating crowd, a determined look on his face. Akira looked up from her ledger, her professional mask dissolving into pure, unadulterated relief.

Before she could say a word, Isamu reached the desk, took her hand in his, and brought it to his lips, his usual cocky grin replaced by something far more genuine.

“I really missed the sound of your stamp hitting my poorly filled-out forms,” he said, his voice low and meant only for her.

Akira’s face flushed a deep crimson. “Y-you idiot! You can’t just— everyone is watching!” she stammered, trying to pull her hand back, but he held it gently.

“Let them watch,” he murmured, his thumb tracing circles on her knuckles. “I spent a month in too-quiet forests with nothing but Hayate’s snoring. I missed your voice. I even missed you yelling at me.”

“I—I did not yell that much,” she whispered, her protest weak, her eyes locked on his.

“You yell the perfect amount,” he replied, his smile soft. “It’s my favorite sound after the clash of my sword.”

From across the room, Scarlett’s voice cut through their bubble like a thrown dagger. “OI! ROMEO AND JULIET! Save the dramatic declarations for after dark when I can bet on how it ends! Juliet, stop swooning and get the new member form. Now.”

Akira jumped, yanking her hand back as if burned, her blush reaching the tips of her ears. “S-S-SO-SORRY, MASTER!” She fumbled frantically through a drawer, avoiding everyone’s amused gazes. “A-and, um, overall… who is he?” she asked, gesturing to Kokan, who was standing stiffly amidst the chaos, looking utterly lost.

Seeing her cue, Scarlett hopped onto the nearest table, stomping her boot to get everyone’s attention. The room quieted, all eyes turning to her.

“LISTEN UP, YOU ANIMALS!” she yelled, a dramatic flair in her voice. “This gloomy-looking specimen here is Kokan! From now on, he’s our responsibility! And not just because he’s a brat who needs a serious attitude adjustment!” She paused for effect. “He’s the grandson and sole heir of Lydia the Mermaid and Zohan the Swordsman!”

A wave of awe and excited whispers swept through the hall. Heirs of legends were rare.

“Which means,” Scarlett continued, “he’s got big shoes to fill and a lot of training to do! So, welcome him like you welcome everyone else: with chaos, bad advice, and enough beer to drown a dragon! NOW, GET BACK TO YOUR DRINKING! THIS IS A WELCOME PARTY!”

The hall exploded in a renewed frenzy of cheers. Guild members swarmed Kokan, clapping him on the back, shoving a mug into his hand, and dragging him into a chaotic arm-wrestling match before he could even protest. He felt annoyed, overwhelmed, but also… something else. They weren’t bowing or treating him with distant respect. They were treating him like… family. A loud, messy, slightly insane family.

Akira finally managed to shove a form and a quill into his hands. “N-name, age, special skills, known allergies, and… um… preferred breakfast food? It’s for the kitchen. Master’s orders.” She was still bright red, unable to look Isamu in the eye.

The party raged on into the night. By sunrise, the guild hall was a battlefield of sleep. Members were snoring under tables, Hayate was using Yudai’s back as a pillow, and Shojin was curled up in a corner like an overexcited puppy. Kokan found himself slumped in a chair, a blanket someone had thrown over him, watching the scene in disbelief.

Shojin stumbled over, plopping down beside him with a yawn. “Crazy, right?”

“...It’s something,” Kokan muttered.

“Hey, so… why’d you come here anyway?” Shojin asked, his usual loudness softened by the late hour.

And something about the quiet, the shared exhaustion, made Kokan talk. He yelled his story into the quiet hall—his parents' death, his isolation, his cold mansion, his little sister, the weight of a legacy he never wanted. Shojin listened, his eyes wide.

When Kokan finished, Shojin was quiet for a moment. Then he grinned. “Wow. That’s… a lot. But you know what? My dream is to be the greatest adventurer ever! You got any dreams, bro?”

Kokan looked down. “...No.”

Shojin slapped his knee. “That’s okay! You will! We’ll find one! And from now on, we’re friends!” He declared it like it was a law of the universe.

Kokan, to his own surprise, gave a slow, hesitant nod. He actually liked this loud, idiotic ball of energy.

Suddenly, a shadow fell over them.

“Alright, you lot! Naptime’s over!”

Scarlett stood on the balcony overlooking the main hall, the rising sun framing her like a fiery halo. Her voice, sharp and clear, cut through the hungover haze. Everyone stirred, groaning. What followed was a miraculous sight to Kokan: the most chaotic place he’d ever seen fell into a dead, serious silence in seconds. Every eye was fixed on their master.

“I let you have your fun,” Scarlett said, her voice low and grave, all traces of laziness gone. “But now, we face reality. What I told you about the conclave wasn’t a rumor. It’s fact. The winds are fading. The barrier Lady Sylph created is dying. We have one year. One year until it shatters completely and the true horrors of the outside world pour into our home.”

A tense silence gripped the room.

“They will come for our freedom. For our lives. For our home. And we will not let them have it!” Her voice rose, filling the hall with fierce intensity. “We will not cower! We will not hide! We will get stronger! We will fight! And we will take our freedom, our future, with our own hands! ARE YOU WITH ME?!”

The response was instantaneous and deafening. A roar of approval shook the very foundations of the guild hall. Fists punched the air. Mugs were slammed on tables. There was no fear, only fierce, untamed resolve.

Kokan watched, utterly stunned. They weren’t afraid. They were… excited. motivated. He looked around at the determined faces, the fierce camaraderie, and finally, he understood. He looked up at the guild’s banner, whispering to himself, “Granny Lydia… so that’s why you wanted me to live here. They’re not just strong… they’re brave in a way I’ve never seen. They’re… unique.”

Across the hall, Scarlett turned away from her cheering guild. She looked out a window towards the distant, shimmering heart of the kingdom, her expression unreadable. In the quiet of her own mind, she made a vow to the ghosts of her past.

Mom. Sylph. Rex. Lydia. Zohan. Everyone… I promise. I will save our home. I will protect the world you built.

The storm was coming. But Sylax would be ready.

Chapter 16: The Unwanted Apprentice

A week had passed since the great warning, and Sylax had responded in the only way it knew how: controlled, weaponized chaos. The guild hall and its surrounding grounds had transformed into a perpetual training ground. The air rang with the clash of steel, the thwump of spell impacts, and the grunts of exertion.

In one corner, the Crimson Fangs (minus their captain) were running drills. Hayate's hammer sent shockwaves through the training dummies, while Yudai's dual blades moved in a blur, slicing falling leaves in half before they could touch the ground. Pino darted between them, creating illusory duplicates that Hayate kept accidentally swinging at, and Hinata patched up the resulting minor scrapes with long-suffering sighs.

Their captain, Isamu, was notably absent from the training. He was, instead, leaning against the reception desk, employing his own version of advanced combat tactics on Akira.

"...and so I told the Dark Goblin Chief," Isamu said, striking a heroic pose, "that if he wanted a piece of me, he'd have to get through my impeccable form first." He winked. "Akira, my love, your frown is deeper than the chasms of the Northern Wastes. A smile would look much better on you."

Akira kept her eyes glued to a ledger, her cheeks pink. "Your 'impeccable form' currently includes using my desk as a prop. And my frown is because this quest report you filed says you 'negotiated with the wildlife.' Isamu, you drew a mustache on a territorial bear."

"And it looked dashing!" he protested. "We came to an understanding! He kept the mustache, I kept my head! It's called diplomacy."

Near the old oak tree, a different, far less diplomatic training was underway. Scarlett moved like a shadow, a training dagger in her hand. Kokan, drenched in sweat and frustration, launched attacks with water whips and ice shards. Each move was powerful, precise, and utterly predictable.

"Too slow!" Scarlett yawned, sidestepping a spear of ice and tapping him on the shoulder with her dagger. "Your power is a sledgehammer, coldy. I need you to be a scalpel. Think! Stop trying to overpower everything and outsmart it!"

"I am thinking!" Kokan grunted, swinging again.

"You're brooding," she corrected, ducking under his arm and kicking his legs out from under him. "There's a difference. Brooding is for emo poets in coffee shops. Thinking is for survivors."

Watching this display of power with starry-eyed envy was Shojin. He had spent the week asking every member of the Fangs to train him.

“Hayate! Show me the Hammer of Destiny!” “Busy.Ask Yudai.” “Yudai!Teach me the Way of the Silent Blade!” A flat,uninterested stare was his only reply. “Pino!Show me how to make illusions!” “Sure!First, stand very still and think about being incredibly bored!” Pino giggled, and for a full minute, Shojin saw the world in varying shades of beige before the illusion dropped. “Hinata!Teach me the healing arts!” “Oh,sweetie,” Hinata said patting his head. “Let’s start with not setting yourself on fire first.”

Dejected, he’d finally approached Isamu. “Captain! Train me! Make me strong!”

Isamu, without looking away from Akira, pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “My schedule’s full, kid. Can’t you see I’m in the middle of a critical strategic operation?”

Shojin groaned in defeat, slumping against a wall. “Aghhh!!! Why is no one ready to train with me?!”

A passing adventurer, sharpening his axe, chuckled. “If you wanna get strong fast, what do you think about the Master?”

The words hit Shojin like a lightning bolt. He tapped his chin, remembering Hayate’s words from the cave: “You need training. A mentor.” And then Lady Lina’s declaration echoed in his mind: “In all of Sylphania, there is no one stronger than Scarlett.”

His eyes widened. Of course! Why aim for the Fangs when you could aim for the sun itself?

“Thnx, mister!” he yelled, and took off like a shot towards the oak tree.

Scarlett had just disarmed Kokan for the tenth time when a blur of energy skidded to a halt in front of her.

“Oi, Granny! I want to talk to you!”

THWACK!

Scarlett’s hand connected with the back of his head without her even turning around. “I have a name, you hyperactive gnat. Spill the beans. Make it quick.”

Rubbing his head, Shojin took a deep breath, puffing out his chest. “Please! Become my sensei!”

Scarlett stared at him for a second, then burst out laughing. “Nah!! Nah!! Nope! No way! Absolutely not!” She waved her hands dismissively. “I already have one moody, brooding project,” she said, jerking a thumb at Kokan. “I don’t need a second, especially one that’s 90% noise and 10% questionable life choices. My sanity has limits.”

“But—!”

“Nope! Conversation over!” she declared, turning on her heel and walking away, leaving a cloud of dust and a very determined Shojin behind.

This rejection was merely the opening salvo in what would become Shojin’s Great Persistence War.

The Siege of the Guild Master:

· Lunch Time: Scarlett was peacefully devouring a roasted turkey leg when Shojin popped out from under the table, sending plates flying. “PLEASE BE MY SENSEI!” Her roar of“GET LOST!” shook the rafters. She abandoned her lunch.
· Office Hours: Seeking peace, she retreated to her office. She glanced out the window. There, dangling from a tree branch by his knees, was Shojin, his face upside-down and pressed against the glass. “PLEASE BECOME MY SENSEI!” A ceramic mug flew through the glass.Shojin yelped and fell into a bush.
· Forest Walk: For a moment of true solitude, she ventured into the forest. The birds were singing, the sun was dappling through the leaves. Peace. Suddenly, Shojin dropped from a tree branch right in front of her. “BE MY SENSEI, PLEASE!” Her punch sent him tumbling into a creek.
· The Night Invasion: It was night. Scarlett, paranoid, entered her room. She looked under the bed. She checked the closet. She peered out the window. All clear. She let out a sigh, panting with relief. “Water…” she mumbled. A glass of water was handed to her. “Thanks,” she said, taking a long drink. She froze. The hand that gave it to her was… familiar. She turned slowly. There, standing by her bedside table with a hopeful grin, was Shojin. “PLEASE MY SENSEI!” The kick she delivered launched him out of her room and into the hallway with a yelp.

For ten days, it continued. During breakfast, while she was giving Kokan a lesson on footwork, while she was reviewing quest reports, even once (to her eternal fury) when she was heading into the bathhouse (“SENSEI, THE WATER IS NICE TODAY!”). He was a ghost, a poltergeist of pure, unadulterated pestering.

On the tenth day, Scarlett looked like a woman on the edge. There were dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was slightly more disheveled than usual. She was sitting at the bar, chugging a large tankard of beer, her eye twitching slightly.

Shojin approached, a fresh bruise on his cheek from the previous day’s rejection. He opened his mouth. “Sens—”

SLAM!

Scarlett slammed her tankard down on the counter, beer sloshing everywhere. The entire guild hall went silent.

“FINE!” she yelled, her voice raw with annoyance. “FINE! OKAY! I’LL DO IT! I’LL BE YOUR CURSED SENSEI! JUST FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT IS UNTAMED, STOP ASKING ME!”

A massive, brilliant, sun-shaped grin exploded on Shojin's face. "REALLY?! YOU MEAN IT?!"

"YES! NOW SHUT UP!" she roared, grabbing him by the collar. "Your first lesson starts NOW! And it's with him!" She dragged a shocked Shojin over to a equally surprised Kokan and shoved them together.

"Congratulations, coldy," she said, her voice dripping with sarcastic menace. "You now have a training partner. Your new goal is to not let this walking disaster get himself killed while trying to copy you. And you," she pointed at Shojin, "your only job is to not annoy me for the next five minutes. Let's see if you can manage it."

And so, the most chaotic apprenticeship in Sylax's history began. Scarlett, the reluctant master, stood with her arms crossed, watching her two vastly different students: one a brooding fountain of immense power, the other a hyperactive volcano of enthusiasm.

"Alright, knuckleheads!" she barked. "Shojin, try to hit him. Kokan, try not to freeze him solid. Try being the operative word. I'll be over here… drinking."

The two boys looked at each other. Kokan with resigned annoyance, Shojin with uncontainable excitement.

"Hi, bro!" Shojin beamed. "...Don't call me that,"Kokan sighed, readying his stance. The first day of training was a mess of slipped punches,accidental fireballs, and Scarlett's increasingly creative insults yelled from her lawn chair. It was chaotic, it was hilarious, and despite her protests, a tiny, almost imperceptible smirk played on Scarlett's lips. This was going to be interesting.

Chapter 17: The Grumpy Sensei and Her Two Headaches

The "training"—a term Scarlett used with the same sincerity as "peaceful nap"—commenced with all the grace of a barrel of lit fireworks rolling down a staircase.

Scarlett had dragged a worn-out lawn chair into the training yard, planted it with a definitive thud, and slumped into it with a tankard of something strong. She pointed a lazy finger between Kokan and Shojin.

"Alright, listen up, you're giving me a migraine and we haven't even started. Rule one: I am not a 'Granny,' a 'Sensei,' or any other cutesy name. You will call me 'Master,' 'Boss,' or 'Hey, you.' Understood?"

Shojin, vibrating with excitement, yelled, "YES, GRANNY—I MEAN, MASTER!"

Scarlett’s eye twitched. "Rule two: If you set each other on fire or freeze each other solid, Hinata is off-duty. You can thaw yourselves out. Rule three: Your first lesson is... don't die. Begin."

The two boys stared at her, then at each other. Kokan looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. Shojin looked like all his namedays had come at once.

"Okay, bro!" Shojin beamed, falling into a wobbly fighting stance. "Let's do this!"

"Don't call me 'bro'," Kokan muttered, not even bothering with a stance. He just looked bored.

Shojin lunged first, a wild, telegraphed punch aimed at Kokan's shoulder. "FIRE FIST!"

A pathetic sputter of flame fizzled around his knuckles. Kokan didn't move. He just willed a small, shimmering wall of ice to appear in front of his shoulder. Shojin's fist hit the ice with a dull thud, the fire extinguishing with a hiss.

"OW! Cold! Why’d you do that?" Shojin whined, shaking his hand.

"To stop your punch," Kokan replied flatly.

"WELL, IT WORKED!"

From her lawn chair, Scarlett took a long sip from her tankard. "Thrilling. I'm on the edge of my seat. Really. Try using your head, fire-brat. And you, ice-prince, stop being so predictable. He's going to punch you. Do something unexpected."

Shojin tried again, this time a kick. "FIRE KICK!" Kokan sighed and created another ice block to intercept it.

THUD. HISS. OW!

This pattern continued for an hour. Shojin would yell an attack name and charge. Kokan would effortlessly block it with a minimal, precise use of his water magic. It was less a sparring match and more a very repetitive, very noisy demonstration of why controlled power beats uncontrolled enthusiasm.

Scarlett watched, her commentary a steady stream of unhelpful critiques delivered between sips. "Wow.That was the worst roundhouse kick I've ever seen. My grandmother kicks harder, and she's been dust for nine thousand years." "Coldy,if you make one more perfect, boring, hexagonal ice shield, I'm going to throw up." "Fire-brat,your stance is so open I could drive a wagon through it. And I might."

Finally, Shojin, panting and covered in minor frostburns, slumped to his knees. "This is impossible! He's too good!"

Kokan, barely having broken a sweat, just shrugged. "You're too loud. And you keep announcing your attacks."

"OF COURSE I ANNOUNCE THEM! THEY HAVE COOL NAMES!"

Scarlett finally stood up, her chair screeching back. "Alright, that's enough of that. You're both doing it wrong."

They looked at her. "We are?" Shojin asked.

"Yes. You," she pointed at Kokan, "are fighting like a calculator. All logic, no instinct. And you," she pointed at Shojin, "are fighting like a startled squirrel. All instinct, no logic. You're opposites. And right now, you're canceling each other out."

She strode into the training yard. "The problem isn't your power. It's your heads. Kokan, you're so busy thinking three steps ahead you're missing the one step right in front of you. Shojin, you're not thinking about the next step at all."

She grabbed Shojin and positioned him in front of her. "Your fire is passion. It's wild. But right now, it's a campfire. I need it to be a forge. Focus it. Don't just let it explode out of you. Guide it." She poked his stomach. "It comes from here, not your fists."

Then she turned to Kokan. "And you. Water adapts. It flows. It finds the path of least resistance and then wears down a mountain through it. You're trying to be the mountain. Stop it. Be the river. Stop controlling and start feeling the fight."

She stepped back. "Now. Again. But this time, fire-brat, I don't want to see a big flame. I

want to see a single, focused ember on your fingertip that's so hot it turns blue. And coldy, I don't want a shield. I want you to mist. Evade. Make the air around you so humid he sweats instead of burns."

The next few days were a special kind of hilarious torture.

Shojin spent hours staring at his finger, his face screwed up in concentration, producing everything from pathetic smoke rings to accidental, small explosions that blackened his eyebrows. "BLUE FIRE! BLUE FIRE! COME ON! ...Agh, it's orange again."

Kokan, tasked with "feeling the flow," looked utterly ridiculous. He'd stand in the middle of the yard, eyes closed, trying to "become one with the humidity," while Shojin accidentally set a nearby bush on fire.

Scarlett's teaching style was... unique. For Shojin:"FOCUS, YOU LITTLE INFERNO! Imagine your anger! Imagine Isamu just stole the last meat pie!" For Kokan:"NO, NOT A FOG MACHINE! I said mist! Be elusive! Mysterious! Not just... wet and confusing!"

She'd often resort to throwing things at them—pebbles, apples, once a very confused chicken that had wandered too close—to force them to react instinctively rather than intellectually.

The breakthrough, as it often did in Sylax, came from chaos.

Shojin, in a fit of frustration, let out a yell and unleashed a wave of fire far wider than he intended. It rushed toward Kokan, who, instead of throwing up a wall of ice, finally took Scarlett's advice. He dissolved. His form became a shimmering, translucent mist just as the fire passed through where he'd been standing.

The fire hit the now-empty space and dissipated. A second later, Kokan reformed behind Shojin, looking as surprised as everyone else.

Shojin spun around, gaping. "WHOAH! How'd you do that?!"

"I... I don't know," Kokan admitted, a flicker of something other than annoyance in his eyes. "I just... didn't want to get burned."

From her chair, Scarlett didn't smile. But she did give a single, curt nod. "Took you long enough. Now, fire-brat. Your turn. The ember. Now."

Shojin, inspired by Kokan's success, took a deep breath. He didn't yell. He focused. He remembered the determination in his heart, the promise to become strong. He held up his index finger. A tiny, flickering flame appeared. It sputtered, fought, and then—it intensified, compressing, turning from orange to a brilliant, searing white-blue. It wasn't big, but the heat coming off it was immense.

"HAH! DID IT! MASTER, LOOK! BLUE FIRE!" he yelled, immediately losing concentration and causing the ember to vanish in a puff of smoke.

Scarlett sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Progress. Ugly, stupid, progress... but progress." She stood up. "Alright, headaches. That's enough for today. You've managed to not maim each other for a full two hours. I'm calling it a win."

As they trudged back toward the guild hall, exhausted but with a newfound glimmer of understanding, Shojin slung a sooty arm around Kokan's shoulders.

"See, bro? We're getting it! Soon we'll be unstoppable! The fiery sun and the cool water! We'll be an... an... ocean of steam!"

Kokan, for the first time, didn't immediately shove him off. He just sighed, a sigh that was only 90% exasperation instead of the usual 100%. "It doesn't work like that," he muttered, but there was no heat in it.

Scarlett watched them go, her two unwanted apprentices—one a brooding heir to a legacy, the other a loudmouthed ball of fire. They were annoying, exhausting, and gave her a perpetual headache.

But as she saw Shojin try to show Kokan his "blue ember" again and accidentally set his own sleeve on fire, prompting Kokan to instinctively douse it with a splash of water from a nearby trough, a very small, very well-hidden grin touched Scarlett's lips before she could stop it.

They were disasters. But they were her disasters. And against all odds, they might just not be completely hopeless.

Chapter 18: Scarlett’s Headaches Pay Off

A month passed in a whirlwind of sweat, singed eyebrows, and the perpetual sound of Scarlett’s exasperated yelling. The training yard of Sylax had become a familiar warzone, its grass now a patchwork of scorched earth and perpetually damp puddles that never seemed to fully dry.

The change in the two apprentices was subtle but significant. Shojin’s wild flailing had tightened into something resembling actual combat forms, though they were still fueled by his trademark explosive energy. Kokan’s defensive ice walls had become less rigid, sometimes flowing into graceful parries or slick surfaces meant to trip an opponent rather than just stop them. They were learning to speak each other’s language—a chaotic mix of fire and water, instinct and calculation.

But Scarlett wanted more. She wanted signatures. Moves that were uniquely theirs, born from their personalities and honed into weapons.

“Power is useless if it’s just noise and splash,” she barked one afternoon, dodging a stray firebolt from Shojin that set a hanging banner smoldering. “I need you two to stop throwing your elements around like spoiled children and start conducting them. Make them sing your song.”

For Shojin, the breakthrough was as dramatic as he was.

“You fight like you’re trying to be a bonfire,” Scarlett critiqued, easily sidestepping another of his lunges. “Big, loud, and easily avoided. I don’t need a bonfire. I need a spear. A focused, unstoppable thrust of pure will and fire. Stop spreading it out. Rise with it.”

The word clicked in Shojin’s mind. Rise. He remembered watching a phoenix in an old tapestry in the guild hall, its wings engulfed in flames as it soared from the ashes. That was it. Not an explosion, but an ascent.

For days, he practiced. He’d focus all his energy, not into his fists, but into his core, compressing it, building the pressure until he felt like he would burst. He’d envision the phoenix, wings unfurling. The results were… mixed. He’d often lose control, resulting in a standard, if powerful, fireball. Or he’d fail to compress the energy, resulting in a pathetic puff of smoke.

“You’re thinking too hard, fire-brat!” Scarlett yelled, chucking an apple at his head. “It’s not in your brain, it’s in your gut! Your spirit! What makes you want to fly? What makes you want to win? Channel that!”

Frustrated, Shojin closed his eyes. He thought of his dream—to be the greatest adventurer. He thought of the Crimson Fangs saving him. He thought of Scarlett's grudging acceptance. He wanted to be worthy. He wanted to soar.

He took a deep breath, and instead of yelling, he let the energy build silently. His body began to glow, a deep red-orange light emanating from his chest. He crouched low, coiling like a spring.

"Rising…" he whispered, his voice tight with concentration.

He pushed off the ground with everything he had, not just his legs, but with the built-up fire energy. A vortex of flames erupted around him, not an explosion outwards, but a controlled cyclone shooting upwards. For a breathtaking second, he wasn't jumping; he was ascending, wreathed in the form of a magnificent, shrieking phoenix made of pure flame. He shot ten feet into the air, the heat intense and focused, before the form dissolved and he landed clumsily, panting heavily.

The training yard was silent, save for the crackle of fading embers.

Scarlett stared, a piece of the apple she'd been eating frozen halfway to her mouth. She chewed slowly, swallowed, and gave a single, curt nod. "...Huh.The 'Rising Phoenix Blaze.' Don't get cocky. You stuck the landing like a dropped sack of potatoes. We'll work on that."

Shojin's exhausted panting broke into a massive, triumphant grin.

For Kokan, the challenge was the opposite. His power was already precise, already controlled. Scarlett needed to break him out of it.

"You fight like you're drawing diagrams," she said, effortlessly deflecting his water whip with a shadow-tendril. "All lines and angles. Water isn't a blueprint; it's a feeling. It's the pull of the moon, the crash of the wave, the silent, cutting depth of the tide. Stop directing it and let it flow through you."

The concept was foreign to Kokan. Control was all he had. Letting go felt like surrendering.

"Think of the moon," Scarlett said, her voice unusually quiet one evening as they trained under the sliver of a crescent. "It doesn't try to control the tide. It just is, and the ocean responds. Your power is the ocean. Your will is the moon. You don't force it; you guide it with your presence."

It was during a spar with Shojin that it finally happened. Shojin, emboldened by his new technique, launched a aggressive series of fire jabs. Kokan was backpedaling, throwing up hasty, brittle ice shields that were starting to steam and crack under the heat. He was thinking, calculating the angle of each punch, the rate of melt—and he was losing.

Stop directing. Feel the flow.

He closed his eyes for a split second, ignoring the incoming fire. He felt the moisture in the air, the water in the trough nearby, the latent power within himself. He didn't shape it. He simply pulled.

The water from the trough didn't surge. It flowed, smooth and silent as a ribbon of liquid mercury, wrapping around his arm. As Shojin's next punch came in, Kokan's eyes snapped open. He didn't block. He moved his arm in a graceful, cutting arc.

The water followed his motion, sharpening from a ribbon into a blade so thin it was nearly invisible. It didn't crash into Shojin's fire; it cut through it, extinguishing the flames with a sharp hiss and continuing its path, leaving a clean, shallow cut on Shojin's wrist before dissipating into mist.

Shojin yelped, more in surprise than pain, staring at the thin line of blood. "Hey! What was that?!"

Kokan stood still, looking at his own hand in awe. The move had been effortless. Powerful. Elegant. It felt less like a spell and more like a dance.

From the sidelines, Scarlett's voice cut through the quiet. "The 'Moonlit Tide Cutter.' Took you long enough. It's still sloppy. Your form's too stiff. You look like you're trying to swat a fly, not conduct a symphony."

But despite her words, there was a glint of something akin to pride in her crimson eyes. She hid it by taking a long swig from her ever-present tankard.

The following days were spent refining their new techniques amidst the usual Sylax chaos. Shojin's Rising Phoenix Blazes often went off at random times—once during lunch, scorching the roast chicken, and another time when Pino startled him, resulting in him shooting straight up into the rafters and getting stuck. Kokan's Moonlit Tide Cutter was tested on increasingly bizarre targets—slicing falling leaves in half, precisely cutting a sandwich from across the room for Hayate, and once, at Scarlett's command, shaving a grumpy Yudai's stubble without nicking him (a task that required more focus than any battle).

It was during one of these chaotic refining sessions that Scarlett finally called a halt. She stood before them, her arms crossed, looking them up and down—Shojin buzzing with excited energy, Kokan standing with a new, quiet confidence.

"Alright, headaches," she said, her voice gruff. "The 'Rising Phoenix Blaze' and the 'Moonlit Tide Cutter.' They're not half bad. For a couple of amateurs."

She paused, and then did something she almost never did. She gave them a real, actual compliment, disguised as her usual insult. "You didn't completely waste my time.Or my beer. Now, stop grinning like idiots. We're just getting started. Tomorrow, we work on you two not being completely useless when you try to combine that mess."

She turned and walked back toward the guild hall, leaving them standing in the yard. As she walked, she allowed herself a single, small, private smile. They were still immense headaches. They were still a brooding poet and a hyperactive firecracker.

But they were her headaches. And against all odds, her chaotic, beer-soaked, unorthodox methods were actually paying off. The untamed guild had just gained two new signature moves, and their grumpy sensei couldn't have been more annoyed—or deep down, more satisfied.

Chapter 19: An Urgent Mission from the Palace

The morning symphony of Sylax was in full, glorious swing. At a central table, Scarlett was engaged in her most demanding training exercise: enjoying a plate of bacon while simultaneously using a fork to deflect bits of egg that Shojin kept flinging into the air with his animated storytelling. Kokan, sitting between them, ate with a quiet, precise efficiency, a lone island of calm in a storm of culinary shrapnel.

“—and then BAM!” Shojin yelled, slamming his fist on the table and sending a spoon flying. “The Phoenix Blaze went off, and I shot right up into the rafters! I was stuck for like, an hour!”

“A testament to your incredible power and equally incredible lack of control,” Scarlett droned, snatching the spinning spoon out of the air without looking. “Try chewing with your mouth closed. It’s a less destructive use of your energy.”

The guild hall’s main doors swung open with a force that was familiar, but the figures that entered were not. Five men clad in armor of polished emerald green and burnished gold stood framed in the doorway. Their armor was ornate, gleaming, and utterly foreign—a stark contrast to the practical, scarred, and often questionably clean gear of the Sylax adventurers.

The guild’s noise dipped for a half-second. Dozens of eyes—elf, dwarf, human, kitsune—glanced over. Then, with a collective shrug that was almost synchronized, the chaos resumed. The spectacle wasn't interesting enough to warrant stopping a good arm-wrestling match or interrupting a complicated magical experiment involving a frog and a small thundercloud.

The lead guard, a man with a permanently pinched expression named Bram, looked around the raucous hall with utter contempt. He marched up to the reception desk where Akira was calmly stamping a stack of quest reports.

“You. Girl,” he said, his voice a condescending bark that failed to carry over the general din. “We require an audience. Now.”

Akira didn’t look up, finishing her stamp with a definitive thump. “Welcome to Sylax. Quest board is on the left. Membership applications are on the right. If you’re lost, the exit is behind you.”

Bram’s face flushed. “I am not here for your petty bulletins! I have a special request from a royal house. We require the services of your ‘Crimson Fangs’.”

Now Akira looked up, offering a polite, professional smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m sorry, sir. The Crimson Fangs are currently on a deep-territory reconnaissance mission.

They are unavailable. However, we have several other highly capable teams." She gestured around the hall. "Perhaps the Shadow Talons for stealth, or the Ironclaw Battalion for heavy escort? I can arrange an introduction."

Bram's patience, thinner than a rogue's excuse, snapped. He leaned in, his voice a menacing growl. "You misunderstand. We do not want 'other teams'. We want the Crimson Fangs. Recall them. Immediately."

Akira's smile remained, but it became as frosty as a northern peak. "That is not how we operate, sir. They will return when their mission is complete. If your request is urgent, I suggest you contract another guild. May I suggest the Celestial Guard? They're very… polite."

Fast as a viper, Bram's hand shot out, clamping around Akira's throat and lifting her clear off the ground. The guild's noise didn't just stop; it was vacuumed out of the room.

"You suggest nothing," Bram snarled, shaking her slightly. "You will do as you are—"

He didn't finish.

One moment he was holding Akira aloft, the next he was slammed face-first into the solid oak floor with a sickening CRUNCH, knocked unconscious before his brain could even process the movement.

Standing over him, one boot planted casually on his back, was Scarlett. She held a strip of bacon in her other hand.

"Akira," she said, taking a bite. "You okay?"

Akira, gasping and rubbing her neck, nodded. "Y-yes, Master. Thank you."

The four other guards drew their swords in a shimmer of green steel, but before they could take a step, the atmosphere in the room shifted from chaotic neutral to lethally aligned.

From a shadowy corner, a tall Shadow Elf—Kael Duskclaw of the Shadow Talons—seemed to materialize, a dagger already casually balanced on his fingertip. Near the fireplace, the air crackled as Kaiju Stormcaller, an elemental spirit whose form flickered with contained lightning, slowly stood up, his eyes glowing white. A group of dwarves from the Ironclaw Battalion, led by the formidable Thrain Stoneforge, stopped their card game and hefted their warhammers onto the table with a series of heavy thuds. From the balcony, Liora Sunspire of the Celestial Guard watched with a serene, disapproving gaze, her hand resting on the hilt of her radiant sword.

The entire guild was a coiled spring, a single word away from unleashing a storm of very specific, very practiced violence.

It was then that the fifth figure, who had remained by the door, finally moved. He was enormous, an Oni with tusks curving from his lower lip and armor that seemed hewn from a single block of living emerald. His presence was one of immense, contained power that demanded attention.

“Stand. Down.” His voice boomed, not a yell, but a low-frequency command that vibrated through the floorboards. His own guards immediately sheathed their weapons, their faces pale.

The Oni—General Tharvok Bloodtusk, Warden of the Emerald Throne—ignored his groaning subordinate and bowed his head slightly to Scarlett. “You have my most sincere apologies, Guild Master. Bram’s temper is a flaw I have yet to beat out of him. He will be disciplined. Severely.”

The previously unconscious guard, Bram, chose that moment to groan and sit up, clutching his broken nose. “Chief! She—!”

“SILENCE,” Tharvok said, the word leaving no room for argument. Bram flinched back into a cowed silence.

Scarlett took her boot off Bram’s back. “You should keep your dog wearing a collar. Or a muzzle. Preferably both. It’s rude to let him bite my receptionist.”

Bram scrambled to his feet, fury and pain warring in his eyes. “How dare you! Do you know who he is?! He is General Tharvok Bloodtusk, Warden of the Emerald—”

Scarlett took another bite of bacon. “I don’t know. And I don’t even want to know.”

Bram let out a strangled, incredulous laugh. “As I heard, this guild is really untamed… and ill-mannered.”

His words were met with utter indifference. No one laughed. No one jeered. They just watched, their expressions ranging from bored amusement to cold threat.

Scarlett’s crimson eyes narrowed at Tharvok. “What do you bastards want?”

Bram barked, “Are you raised in a barn?! Have you no manners to speak to the Warden of the Emerald Throne like that?!”

Again, he was a ghost, shouting into a void of pure apathy. Tharvok held up a massive hand, cutting off any further outburst. “We have a mission. We were told to seek out the Crimson Fangs specifically. It is an escort mission of utmost urgency and delicacy.”

Scarlett shrugged. “Like my receptionist said. They’re not here. If you want them, wait two weeks. We’ve got spare cots. The beer’s cheap.”

“We do not have two weeks,” Tharvok replied, his voice grave. “We must reach the border of the Zyvarran Kingdom within that time.”

“Huh!?!” Scarlett feigned surprise. “Then you should leave. Now. Time’s wasting. The Celestial Guard’s hall is that way. They love a good procession.” She pointed a thumb towards the door.

Tharvok’s jaw tightened. “We require a strong adventurer team. The path skirts the blighted borders. The recent… instability… has made it perilous. We will not entrust this to just any sellswords. If you will not recall your team, then I must speak to your guild master to negotiate for another.”

Scarlett gestured to herself with her strip of bacon. “You are. Already talking to her.”

Tharvok’s eyes widened slightly, truly looking at her for the first time—the casual posture, the simple clothes, the air of absolute, unshakeable authority that had an entire guild of powerful misfits ready to riot on her behalf. “Ah. I see. My apologies once more. We were expecting someone… different.”

“Disappointed?”

“Not at all,” Tharvok said, a flicker of respect in his gaze. “It explains much.” He took a step forward, the floorboards creaking. “We will pay you whatever you desire. You are clearly a woman of formidable power. We need you to escort our charge.”

Scarlett yawned. “Nah. I’m busy. Training these two headaches.” She jerked a thumb at Shojin and Kokan.

“It is Prince Orvyn Zahrakar of Zyvarra,” Tharvok pressed, a hint of desperation creeping into his tone. “The ‘Emerald Serpent’. He must reach his homeland for his sister’s wedding. Princess Lyssara’s—the ‘Jade Whisper’—union is vital for our kingdom’s stability.”

Scarlett paused, her interest slightly piqued. “Why’s a guard from… wherever you’re from… escorting a prince from somewhere else?”

“We are his personal guard, sworn to his service since his birth,” Tharvok explained. “Zyvarra is a small, reclusive kingdom, but it is our home. The journey is too dangerous for our forces alone now. We need strength we can trust. We were told the Crimson Fangs were the best. In their absence, we will settle for their master.”

Scarlett turned away from him, looking at her two apprentices. Shojin was still shoveling food into his mouth, watching the scene with wide, excited eyes. Kokan was watching Tharvok with a cool, analytical gaze, assessing the threat.

“So, boys,” Scarlett said in her grumpiest tone. “Field trip. Escort a fancy prince through monster-infested badlands. Probably good for your training. Get you out of my hair for a week. What do you say?”

Shojin swallowed his food with a loud gulp. “YES! Granny, it’s been a while since my last mission! This’ll be my second one! It’s gonna be awesome! Maybe I’ll get to use my Phoenix Blaze on a real monster!”

Kokan looked more hesitant. “But Master… a high-stakes escort mission… for foreign royalty? It’s my first real mission. The risk of failure is—”

Scarlett rolled her eyes so hard it looked painful. “There are no ranks in Sylax, ice-prince. We’re free. We take any mission that looks interesting, stupid, or pays for the beer. I only asked ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Are you in or are you out?”

The two boys looked at each other, a silent conversation passing between them. Then they looked back at her and nodded firmly.

Scarlett turned back to Tharvok, a lazy, triumphant smirk on her face. “Alright, mister. You got a deal. Me and the headaches. We’ll escort your prince. We meet tomorrow morning. At the border outpost. Don’t be late.”

Tharvok looked visibly relieved, though he tried to hide it behind a mask of formality. He bowed deeply. “You have our thanks, Guild Master Scarlett. The Kingdom of Zyvarra will not forget this.” He shot a glare at Bram. “Collect the fool. We make for the outpost to prepare.”

As the emerald-clad guards departed, one supporting a dazed and bleeding Bram, the guild’s noise slowly returned to its usual deafening level, now buzzing with the new gossip.

Scarlett slumped back into her chair, finishing her bacon. “Ugh. Royals. So much drama.” She looked at her two eager apprentices. “Alright, headaches. Go pack. And for the love of all that is untamed, try not to embarrass me in front of the prince. Or his scary-looking bodyguard.”

Shojin pumped his fist. “Yes! This is gonna be epic!” Kokan simply nodded,a new, serious light in his eyes. His first mission. For a prince. The pressure was on, and for the first time, it wasn’t a weight. It was a challenge. And he was ready to meet it. The untamed guild was going on a royal escort.

Chapter 20: The Road to the Borders

The evening sun cast long, lazy shadows through the chaotic mess of the Sylax guild hall. The usual post-training revelry was tinged with a sense of occasion. In the middle of it all, Shojin was trying to fit three separate bags of jerky into a single pack, while Kokan meticulously checked and re-checked his water skins, ensuring they were perfectly sealed.

“You don’t need a week’s supply of smoked meat for a three-day trip, fire-brat,” Scarlett’s voice cut through the noise as she descended the stairs, a single, worn travel pack slung over her shoulder. It looked laughably small compared to the mountain of gear Shojin was attempting to assemble.

“But what if we get lost, Granny?!” Shojin argued, trying to zip a bulging bag. “What if there’s no food? What if we have to survive on bugs and our own wits?!”

“Then you’ll starve, because your wits are thinner than the air you waste talking,” she retorted, snatching one of the jerky bags and tossing it to a nearby dwarf from the Ironclaw Battalion, who caught it with a grunt of thanks. “Travel light, move fast, eat what you kill. That’s the Sylax way. Now, are you two disasters ready or do I need to leave you behind?”

With a final, determined zip, Shojin hoisted his overstuffed pack. “Ready!” Konan gave a silent,sharp nod.

Scarlett rolled her eyes but a faint smirk played on her lips. She hopped onto a nearby table, cupped her hands around her mouth, and yelled over the din.

“OI!! MY WILDIES!! LISTEN UP!”

The hall fell into an immediate, expectant silence. Every member of every team—Shadow Talons, Stormbreakers, Celestial Guard, all of them—turned to her.

“I’m taking the headaches on a field trip!” she announced. “Gotta go babysit some royalty. Try not to burn the place down while I’m gone! Akira’s in charge of the paperwork. Thrain, you’re in charge of the structural integrity. Kaiju, no summoning thunderstorms indoors. Kael, if you ‘borrow’ my good whiskey again, I’ll know. The rest of you… try to keep the chaos to a manageable level. SYLAX IS YOURS!”

The response was a deafening, unified roar that shook the foundations of the hall. Mugs were raised, weapons were banged on tables, and a dozen promises were shouted over each other, most of them involving causing more chaos, not less.

Akira pushed through the crowd, a neatly wrapped package in her hands. “For the road, Master,” she said, handing it to Scarlett. “Some smoked pheasant and fresh bread. And… please be careful.”

Scarlett took the package, her expression softening for a microsecond. “Always am.” She then turned and shoved the package into Shojin’s arms. “You carry it. You wanted supplies.”

And with that, the trio turned and walked out of the guild hall, the sounds of their family’s raucous farewell following them into the twilight.

The road out of the city was quiet, the bustling streets giving way to wide plains under a sky slowly filling with stars. Shojin’s energy was boundless.

“So, bro,” he said, bouncing alongside Kokan. “Have you ever, you know, crossed the border? Seen the big, invisible wall thingy?”

Kokan shook his head, his eyes on the darkening horizon. “No. I never left the estate grounds until… recently.”

“Whaaat? Seriously? Master!” Shojin yelled ahead to Scarlett, who was walking a few paces ahead. “Have you crossed it? The barrier?”

Scarlett didn’t turn around. “Umm. Yes. A thousand times, maybe more.”

Both boys’ eyes went wide. “A thousand?!” Shojin gasped. “What’s it like on the other side? Are there giant monsters? Mountains of gold? Secret cities?”

“Evil,” Scarlett said, her voice losing its usual lazy edge, becoming flat and serious. “It’s… a scarred land. Full of things that have festered in the dark for ten thousand years, waiting for a chance to get in. You’ll get to know it soon enough. Don’t be so excited.”

Her tone killed Shojin’s chatter for a full five minutes, a new record. They walked in silence, the gravity of their mission beginning to sink in.

After a day and a half of walking, the landscape began to change. The lush fields of central Sylphania gave way to hardier, tougher flora. The air grew sharper, carrying a faint, metallic tang. In the distance, a shimmering, almost imperceptible distortion hung in the air, like heat haze on a summer day, but colder. The Barrier.

And there, waiting at a small, fortified outpost just before the shimmering veil, was their party.

General Tharvok stood like a carved emerald statue, his arms crossed. Beside him were his five guards, looking far more alert and less arrogant than they had in the guild hall. And there was a fancy, enclosed carriage hitched to two patient, sturdy horses.

“Guild Master Scarlett,” Tharvok said, bowing his head. “You are punctual. Thank you for coming.”

“Told you I would be,” Scarlett replied, stopping before him. “I’m Scarlett. Scarlett of Sylax. These are my headaches. The loud one is Shojin Takeru. The quiet, broody one is Kokan Tohei.”

Tharvok nodded to each of them. “A pleasure. Allow me to introduce my team properly.” He gestured to each guard in turn. “This is Veyra Thornsong.”A naga with scales the color of mossy stone nodded, her spear held steady. “Ignis Fireclaw.”An elemental spirit of fire, his form flickering gently within his armor, gave a short, sharp bow. “Feylin Starleaf.”A tiny fairy with moth-like wings and serious eyes zipped up and did a quick loop in the air. “Korvath Stonehide.”A dwarf with a magnificent braided beard and a massive axe grunted, not taking his eyes off the horizon. “And you remember Bram Draeven.”The dragonnoid guard with the recently broken nose glared at the ground, refusing to make eye contact.

Shojin was staring, utterly fascinated. “Wow! A real fire spirit! And a fairy! And a—OW!” Scarlett had punched him in the arm without looking.

“Manners, fire-brat,” she muttered.

Tharvok then turned and gestured toward the carriage. The door opened, and a young man stepped out.

Prince Orvyn Zahrakar was not what Shojin had expected. He was tall and slender, with elegant features and sharp, intelligent eyes that held a hint of amber. His skin had a faint, almost iridescent greenish scale pattern along his neck and the backs of his hands. He wore traveling clothes of fine, dark green leather, practical yet exquisitely made. There were no wings, no dramatic tail. His power was subtler, a quiet intensity that radiated from him.

“Wh--what!?” Shojin blurted out, unable to help himself. “He is prince? I thought princes had, like, giant wings or cool tails or something…”

Scarlett’s foot connected with Shojin’s shin this time, silencing him with a yelp. “What my apprentice means to say,” she said, her voice dripping with false sweetness, “is that it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Highness.”

Prince Orvyn’s lips quirked in a faint, amused smile. “The pleasure is mine, Guild Master. I have heard… stories. I am grateful for your assistance.” His voice was calm and measured, like a deep, still pool.

“Don’t believe all the stories,” Scarlett said. “Most of them are about property damage.”

Tharvok then produced a rolled parchment and handed it to Scarlett. “Our route, Guild Master. We must make haste through the Lunara Wilds. It is the most direct path to the Zyvarran pass.”

Scarlett took the map, unrolling it. Her eyes scanned the familiar contours of the land, the rivers, the mountain passes. Then her gaze landed on the name scrawled across a large, dense forest region: Lunara Wilds.

She froze.

For a split second, her casual, grumpy mask slipped completely. Her breath hitched. Her crimson eyes went distant, seeing not the map, but a flood of memories: the dappled light through ancient trees, the scent of damp earth and wildflowers, the sound of a young girl's laughter echoing her own… a small, hidden cabin. A feeling of safety. A home.

It was all there and gone in a heartbeat. She shook her head slightly, as if physically dislodging the thoughts, and the familiar smirk snapped back into place, though it seemed a little tighter now.

"Lunara Wilds, huh?" she said, her voice a tad too bright. "Alright then. Used to be a nice place for a picnic. Let's hope it still is. We move out in five. Try to keep up, your highness."

She rolled the map up with a sharp snap, her movements brisk and purposeful, all business once more. But for those who knew her best—and even for the observant Prince Orvyn—the brief crack in her armor was unmistakable. The road to the border had just become a road into her past.

Chapter 21: Beyond the Border: The Escort Begins

The formation was set. At the front of the ornate carriage, General Tharvok rode a massive, patient warhorse, his emerald armor seeming to absorb the fading light. Beside him, a sullen Bram Draeven glowered at the path ahead, his dragonnoid snout still slightly swollen.

Flanking the carriage were the other guards: Veyra the Naga slithered with silent, powerful grace on one side, her scales whispering against the hard-packed earth, while Ignis the Fire Elemental moved on the other, his flickering form providing an eerie, shifting torchlight. Feyla the Fairy zipped in agile, scanning patterns overhead, and Korvath the Dwarf brought up the rear guard on a sturdy pony, his axe across his saddle.

And behind them all, forming the rearguard, walked the wild cards of the operation: Scarlett, Shojin, and Kokan. It was a stark contrast—the pristine, disciplined royal guard and the three casually lethal, untamed adventurers from Sylax.

With a deep breath that felt like passing through a wall of cold, static water, the group crossed the shimmering barrier of Sylphania.

The change was immediate and chilling. The air, which had been sharp and clean, now carried the faint, coppery scent of old blood and damp rot. The vibrant greens of the Sylphanian landscape were replaced by gnarled, twisted trees and hardscrabble earth. The very light seemed dimmer, as if the sun itself was hesitant to shine here.

“Whoa,” Shojin whispered, his usual boisterousness dampened. “It’s… different.”

Kokan’s eyes scanned the terrain, noting the subtle scars on the land. “Look there,” he said, pointing to a deep, unnatural gouge in a cliff face, long since weathered but unmistakably not made by nature. “And there.” He indicated patches of earth that were a darker, richer black, as if soaked with something other than water.

Scarlett’s voice was quiet, devoid of its usual sarcasm. “Told you. This is what the world looked like before Sylphania. A endless battlefield. The blood and bones of a thousand wars are the soil here. It’s clean now compared to what it was.”

Kokan looked around, a newfound respect in his eyes. “So these are the places our ancestors crossed… fought… and died.”

“Yes,” Scarlett replied, her voice soft with a memory that was far more personal than she let on.

Shojin, ever unable to stay somber for long, turned to Kokan. “Bro, what do you think? How many of the Covenant Order are still alive? Like, for real?”

Kokan, grateful for the distraction from the grim landscape, fell into the familiar role of the scholar. “I know only three are confirmed alive. First is Lady Lina, the Light Elf Archer. Second is Lord Karatos, the Oni warrior.”

“You said three,” Shojin pressed. “Who’s the third?”

Kokan frowned. “I… don’t know. Lady Lina once told me only three of the founders still walk this world. But she never named the third. It’s strange. In all the history books, in all the statues in the capital… there are only ever twelve members depicted. The records speak of thirteen, but the thirteenth is a ghost. A mystery.”

With a sharpness that made them both jump, Scarlett interrupted. “What if there were only twelve?” she said, her voice a little too quick, a little too forced. She was carefully looking anywhere but at them. “Maybe the historians can’t count. Now, both of you, focus. We are outside the barrier. Anything with teeth, claws, or a hatred for living things could be in that tree line. Watch your sectors.”

The boys fell silent, understanding the subject was closed, though the mystery now burned even brighter in Shojin’s mind.

As dusk began to paint the haunted landscape in shades of purple and grey, Tharvok raised a fist, calling a halt. “We make camp here!” his voice boomed. “The horses need rest. We push into the Lunara Wilds at first light.”

The camp was set with military efficiency by the guards. A small, controlled fire was lit—Ignis merely held his hand over the kindling—and watches were assigned.

Shojin and Kokan sat near the fire, eating their rations, talking in hushed tones about the day’s events. To their surprise, Prince Orvyn emerged from his carriage and, ignoring a sputter of protest from Bram, came and sat near them, though maintaining a careful, regal distance.

Shojin, never one for protocol, didn’t miss a beat. “Oi, Orvyn! How does it feel to be a prince, anyway? Is it all fancy parties and people feeding you grapes?”

Bram choked on his water. “You will address His Highness with the proper—”

Prince Orvyn held up a hand, silencing him. He looked at Shojin, a genuine curiosity in his amber eyes. “It feels… like being a prisoner,” he said, his voice quiet. “A gilded cage is still a cage. There is no freedom. Only duty, protection, and the constant need to be… perfect.” He looked down at his hands. “There are no friends. Only subjects and bodyguards.”

Kokan nodded slowly, understanding in his stormy grey eyes. He knew the weight of expectation, the isolation of a legacy.

Shojin, however, looked horrified. “Ohh, your life sounds so boring! Hey, if you want, we can be your friends!” He said it with the same simplicity he’d offer to share his jerky.

Scarlett, who was sharpening a dagger nearby, let out a short, genuine laugh. “Ohh, my wildies. I never stop them. It’s like trying to stop a landslide.”

Prince Orvyn’s eyes widened, a flicker of hope and wonder in them that made him look his age. “R-Really? You would… do that?”

“Of course, buddy!” Shojin said, beaming. “Right, Kokan?”

Kokan, who had been taking a sip of water, choked. He coughed, sputtering. “W-what!? M-me?!”

“Yeah! We’re a package deal! The fiery sun and the cool water! Bros!”

Bram stood up, his face a mask of outrage. “Your Highness! This is… this urchin is not fit to—”

Orvyn’s head snapped up, and for the first time, his voice held the chill authority of a prince. “Bram. If you wish to remain a member of my guard, you will not interrupt me again when I am speaking. Is that clear?”

Bram paled and sat back down, seething.

Tharvok, who had been observing the exchange with an unreadable expression, cleared his throat and unrolled the map. “Guild Master. A moment of your expertise. We must decide on the fastest path through the Wilds.”

Scarlett joined him, kneeling by the firelight. Tharvok pointed to a route skirting the western edge. “This path is longer but avoids the densest thickets.”

Scarlett shook her head, her finger tracing a more direct line through the heart of the forest. “No. That’s where the swamps are this time of year. You’ll lose half a day navigating the bogs.” Her finger moved with confident certainty. “We cross this pond here, head northeast through the foggy basin. It looks tricky, but it’s solid ground. Then we cut straight through the mid-section. It’s the fastest way. Cuts two days off the journey.”

Tharvok looked from the map to her face, his expression one of deep surprise and admiration. “You speak with such certainty. It is as if you have walked these paths yourself.”

Scarlett kept her eyes on the map, her shadow-elven features unreadable in the flickering light. “Umm. A little bit. In another life.” She quickly rolled up the map. “That’s the route. Take it or leave it.”

“We will take it,” Tharvok said, his voice soft. “I trust your judgment.”

As the night deepened, the camp fell quiet. Shojin, Kokan, and even Prince Orvyn eventually fell asleep, the prince having moved his bedroll slightly closer to the two Sylax adventurers. The guards took their posts.

But two figures remained awake, sitting on opposite sides of the dying fire, a comfortable silence between them.

“They are… unique, your students,” Tharvok said finally, his low voice a rumble in the quiet night.

Scarlett snorted softly, poking the embers with a stick. “That’s one word for it. ‘Headaches’ is another. ‘Catastrophes waiting to happen’ is my personal favorite.”

“Yet you took them on. And you defend them fiercely. I saw how you moved when Bram threatened your receptionist. It was… impressive.”

“She’s family,” Scarlett said simply, as if it explained everything. And to her, it did.

“Family is worth defending,” Tharvok agreed. He was silent for a moment. “The Prince… he has not spoken so freely to anyone outside the court in years. Your ‘fire-brat’ has a gift.”

“He’s an idiot. But he’s a genuine idiot. There’s a difference.”

Tharvok chuckled, a deep, warm sound. “I have spent my life surrounded by politics and poisoned words. In my role, genuine idiocy is… refreshing.”

Scarlett looked up from the fire, meeting his gaze across the flames. “And what is your role, exactly? Warden of the Emerald Throne sounds fancy. What does it mean?”

“It means I am the shield,” he said, his tusks glinting. “I stand between the throne and any who would threaten it. I am the last line of defense. It is a lonely post.”

“Hmph. Sounds familiar,” Scarlett muttered, thinking of her own role, the weight of a secret legacy on her shoulders.

“And you?” Tharvok asked. “Master of the ‘untamed.’ What does that mean?”

A slow, lazy smirk returned to Scarlett’s face. “It means I’m the one who tells the shields to stop being so damn boring and live a little.”

He laughed again, and the sound seemed to push back the oppressive darkness of the borderlands. They talked then, not as a guild master and a general, but as two warriors who had known the weight of command and the solitude it brings. They spoke of strategy, of the changing landscape, of the foolishness of young soldiers and the headaches of leadership. It was a conversation of shared understanding, of glances held a moment too long across the fire, of smiles hidden in the dark.

Chapter 22: Whispers of Lunara

The first light of dawn did little to warm the bleak landscape beyond the barrier. It was a cold, grey affair that seemed to highlight the scars of the land rather than erase them. The camp stirred with the quiet efficiency of the royal guards and the less-quiet, more chaotic energy of the Sylax contingent.

Shojin was attempting to practice his “Rising Phoenix Blaze” as a morning warm-up, resulting in a series of small, yelping jumps and sputters of flame that startled the horses. Kokan was meditating, a faint mist curling around his hands. Prince Orvyn watched them both from the carriage steps with a look of fascinated bewilderment.

“Must you do that?” Bram grumbled, cinching a saddle strap with unnecessary force. “You’ll set the entire plain on fire.”

“Nah, I’ve got it under control!” Shojin yelled back, immediately losing his balance and stumbling into a thorny bush. “See? Controlled stop!”

Scarlett emerged from her bedroll, looking as impeccably put-together and grumpy as if she’d slept in a royal suite instead of on hard ground. Her eyes immediately found Tharvok, who was reviewing the map with Korvath the dwarf.

“Sleep well, Warden?” she asked, her voice still rough with sleep.

Tharvok looked up, and a flicker of something—amusement, warmth—passed through his stern expression. “Well enough, Guild Master. The company was… unexpectedly pleasant.” His gaze held hers for a beat longer than necessary.

Bram, noticing the exchange, rolled his eyes so hard it was a wonder they stayed in his head. “Can we please focus on the deadly journey ahead and not… whatever this is?” he muttered to Ignis, who merely flickered in response.

With the camp packed, they set off toward the dark line of trees that marked the edge of the Lunara Wilds. As they approached, the air grew heavier, filled with the scent of damp earth, blooming night-flowers, and something ancient.

Shojin’s eyes were wide. “Whoa… it’s so… big.”

Kokan nodded, his analytical mind already assessing. “The canopy is dense. Limited visibility. Perfect for ambushes.”

“Oh, don’t be such a gloom-cloud, bro!” Shojin slapped his back. “It’s an adventure! Right, Orvyn?”

Prince Orvyn, walking beside them now despite Bram's disapproving looks, managed a small, genuine smile. "It is… certainly different from the palace gardens."

Scarlett took the lead alongside Tharvok at the forest's edge. She didn't hesitate, stepping into the gloom as if stepping into her own home. The forest swallowed them whole. The light became a green, dappled twilight. The sounds of the outside world faded, replaced by the chorus of strange birds and the rustle of unseen creatures.

"Stay close," Scarlett's voice was low, cutting through the wonder. "And try not to touch anything that looks like it might bite, sting, or poison you. Which is most things."

The path was narrow, forcing them into a single file. Tharvok and Scarlett led, followed by the carriage, with the guards and the boys flanking it.

Tharvok glanced at the map, then at a nearly invisible fork in the path ahead. "The map is unclear here. Which way?"

Scarlett didn't even look at the parchment. "Left. The right path leads to a sinkhole. Looks solid, but it's not. Lost a good pair of boots that way." She said it so casually she didn't seem to notice the odd look Tharvok gave her.

They pressed on. Scarlett's guidance was unnervingly precise. "There's a wasp nest in that hollow log.Give it a wide berth." "The ground is soft here because of a spring underneath.Stick to the roots." "That flower there—the purple one that looks like a laughing skull?Yeah, don't smell it. You'll hallucinate for a week and wake up thinking you're a teacup."

Shojin, of course, immediately started veering toward the flower. "A teacup? Really?" Kokan and Orvyn simultaneously grabbed the back of his tunic and hauled him back."Perhaps we listen to the Master," Orvyn said, a note of alarm in his voice.

After a few hours, they reached the pond Scarlett had pointed out on the map. It was black and still, reflecting the twisted branches overhead like a shattered mirror.

"We cross here," Scarlett announced. "It looks deep,"Veyra the Naga hissed, her forked tongue tasting the air suspiciously. "It's not,"Scarlett said with certainty. "There's a stone causeway just beneath the surface. Follow me. Step exactly where I step."

She moved onto the water's surface without hesitation, her boots finding invisible purchase. Tharvok followed, his trust in her absolute. One by one, they crossed the eerie pond, the only sound the slosh of water and the creak of the carriage wheels on the hidden path.

On the other side, a thick, white fog began to roll in, clinging to the ground and reducing visibility to mere feet.

"Great," Bram grumbled. "Now we're blind."

“The fog basin,” Scarlett said, undaunted. “It’s always like this. It’ll clear once we reach higher ground. Just keep moving. And whatever you hear, don’t wander off. The fog plays tricks.”

The mist was cold and damp, muffling all sound. Whispers seemed to curl at the edge of hearing—voices that sounded almost familiar, laughter that died as soon as you turned your head.

Shojin, Kokan, and Orvyn stuck close together. “Do you hear that?”Shojin whispered. “It sounds like… bacon sizzling.” “I hear my old music tutor,”Orvyn said, looking disturbed. “He’s telling me my posture is atrocious.” “I hear the sound of pages turning,”Kokan murmured. “From the library in my old home.”

Suddenly, Shojin’s eyes went wide. “Hey! Is that a giant, walking meatball?!” He took a step off the path toward the enticing smell.

“NO!” Scarlett and Tharvok shouted in unison.

Tharvok grabbed Shojin’s arm, yanking him back just as the ground where he’d been about to step gave way, revealing a pit filled with sharpened stakes.

“The fog shows you what you desire most to lure you to your death,” Scarlett said, her voice sharp. “Focus, fire-brat. Your desire for a snack is going to get you skewered.”

Shojin paled. “Right. Sorry.”

They continued, the tension high. In the close, silent confines of the fog, Tharvok and Scarlett found themselves walking shoulder-to-shoulder.

“You know this forest too well for someone who’s only been here ‘a little bit’,” Tharvok murmured, his voice low so only she could hear.

Scarlett kept her eyes forward. “I’m a quick learner.”

“I think it is more than that,” he said softly. “You move through it like it is a part of you. It is… remarkable.”

Scarlett glanced at him, a retort dying on her lips at the genuine admiration in his gaze. She looked away, a faint, uncharacteristic blush tinting her cheeks. “Just keep your eyes on the path, Warden. Don’t want you falling in a hole because you’re busy being ‘remarkable’.”

He chuckled, a warm sound in the cold fog. “I am following your lead. I am perfectly safe.”

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the fog began to thin. The air lightened, and the dense press of trees opened up into a slightly wider path dappled with actual sunlight. A collective sigh of relief went through the group.

“We’re through the worst of it,” Scarlett announced, a hint of triumph in her voice. “The mid-section is just ahead. We can make good time now.”

The mood lifted instantly. Shojin high-fived a very confused Prince Orvyn. Even Kokan allowed himself a small smile. Bram stopped grumbling for a whole three minutes.

It was in that moment of relieved distraction that the attack came.

There was no warning roar. Only a sudden, crushing silence as all forest sounds ceased.

From the thick foliage to their right, a creature of nightmare burst forth. It was larger than a bear, its body a grotesque fusion of matted black fur, exposed muscle, and jagged bone spikes. Its eyes were pools of pure malice, and its maw dripped with a saliva that sizzled where it hit the ground—a Dark Lord Beast.

It moved with terrifying speed, its target clear: the prince. It lunged, a blur of claws and teeth, straight for the heart of the group.

The chapter ends with the beast’s talons a foot from Prince Orvyn’s face, the air screaming, and the escort mission exploding into chaos.

Chapter 23: Roar of the Dark Lord

The peace of the sun-dappled path shattered in an instant. The Dark Lord Beast was a tempest of rage and claws, its arrival so sudden it seemed to tear a hole in the world itself. It didn't roar; it ripped the air with a sound like grinding stones and snapping bones.

Its first lunge was a blur of destructive force. It wasn't aimed at a person, but at their means of survival. Talons the size of daggers swiped through the air, eviscerating the supply-laden carriage. Sacks of grain exploded, sending a cloud of flour into the air. Cured meats were shredded. Water skins were punctured, their contents soaking into the thirsty earth. The prince's ornate luggage was reduced to splinters and ribbons of fine silk.

In three heartbeats, their food, their water, their shelter—all of it was gone.

Chaos erupted.

"PROTECT THE PRINCE!" Tharvok's voice boomed, cutting through the panic.

The royal guards snapped into a flawless defensive formation. Veyra the Naga coiled herself around Orvyn, a living shield. Ignis flared his fiery form, creating a barrier of heat. Korvath planted his feet, axe raised, a dwarf-shaped fortress. Feyla zipped around, creating distracting shimmering lights. Bram, for all his bluster, stood his ground, sword drawn, placing himself between the beast and his charge.

The air crackled with tension, the scent of ozone and fear mixing with the beast's foul stench. This was it. The battle for their lives was about to begin.

And then, they all watched as Scarlett, Guild Master of Sylax, yawned.

She didn't draw a weapon. She didn't summon her shadows. She simply stretched her arms over her head, let out a long, languid sigh, and sauntered over to a large, gnarled oak tree at the edge of the clearing. She patted its bark affectionately.

"Well, that was rude," she muttered. Then, she slid down to sit at its base, getting comfortable. She looked directly at the slavering, monstrous beast that was currently the epicenter of all terror.

"Alright, mister doggy," she said, her voice dripping with lazy condescension. "You've made your point. You're big and scary. Now, be a good little abomination and play with my students for a bit. I want a little nap. We had a long walk. I'll deal with you when I wake up."

And with that, she tilted her head back against the tree, folded her arms, and closed her eyes.

The effect was surreal. The beast, as if understanding her insult, paused its snarling for a split second, confused. The royal guards stared, their jaws collectively agape. Bram's face was a masterpiece of pure, unadulterated incredulity.

"IS SHE MAD?!" he shrieked, his voice cracking.

Kokan was the first to find his voice amongst the Sylax apprentices. "MASTER! What are you doing?! It's a Dark Lord Beast! We cannot—!"

Scarlett didn't even open her eyes. She waved a dismissive hand. "You and Shojin will handle it. Consider it a pop quiz. Extra credit if you don't get eaten. Now shush, I'm sleeping."

A soft, almost imperceptible snore escaped her.

Kokan looked from the sleeping form of his master to the eight-foot-tall engine of destruction, then to Shojin, his face a mask of utter horror. "What!? What the heck is this!?"

Shojin, however, was already bouncing on the balls of his feet, a wild, ecstatic grin splitting his face. The destruction, the danger, the sheer absurdity of it all—it was everything he loved.

"You heard her, bro! It's quiz time!" he yelled, falling into his fighting stance. "Alright, doggy! Let's play!"

The beast, its confusion turning back to rage, focused its hellish gaze on the noisy, fiery little morsel. It lunged.

"FIRE FIST!" Shojin yelled, meeting the charge not with retreat, but with a blazing punch that connected with the beast's muzzle.

FWOOM!

The impact was solid, scorching fur and eliciting a pained yelp from the creature. It was more surprised than hurt, but it was enough to make it recoil for a second.

"It's armor is thick on the front!" Kokan yelled, his analytical mind kicking into gear despite his terror. He didn't have a choice. His master had apparently lost her mind, and his only ally was a human torch with a death wish. "Its joints! The back of its legs!"

"ON IT!" Shojin shouted, darting around to the side, a distracting flare of fire.

The beast swiped at him, its claws tearing gouges in the earth. Shojin rolled under the blow, coming up and unleashing a "RISING PHOENIX BLAZE!" He didn't full-on ascend, but used the technique to propel himself in a blazing uppercut into the beast's shoulder, making it stagger.

Seeing an opening, Kokan moved. Water coalesced from the damp air and the remnants of their destroyed supplies, forming into his signature blade. “MOONLIT TIDE CUTTER!” He didn’t aim for the main body; he aimed for the back of the beast’s knee. The ultra-precise, razor-sharp water blade sliced deep into the tendon.

The Dark Lord Beast howled in genuine pain this time, its leg buckling.

Tharvok and his guards could only watch, utterly stunned. They were professional soldiers, trained to fight in formation, to protect, to defend. This was not fighting. This was… a chaotic, insane, breathtakingly effective duet.

The two boys—one a torrent of uncontrolled fiery enthusiasm, the other a stream of icy, precise calculation—were weaving around the beast like they’d been doing it their whole lives. Shojin would draw its attention with a reckless, yelling attack, and Kokan would capitalize with a surgical, silent strike.

“By the Founders…” Tharvok whispered, his weapon half-lowered. He looked at the sleeping form of Scarlett, then back at the battle, and a slow, dawning understanding washed over him. This wasn’t neglect. This was the most brutal, confident form of teaching he had ever witnessed. She had thrown them into the deepest end of the ocean, believing utterly that they could swim. This was why they were called the Untamed Guild.

Bram was having no such moment of enlightenment. “They’re going to get themselves killed! And then it will come for us! We have to help them!”

“No,” Tharvok said, his voice firm, a newfound respect in his eyes. “We hold the perimeter. This is their fight.”

The battle raged. Shojin took a glancing blow that sent him spinning, his arm bleeding, but he popped back up with a laugh. “HA! That tickled!” Kokan was breathing heavily, his movements starting to slow, but his eyes were sharp, constantly analyzing, adapting.

They were holding their own. Against a Dark Lord Beast. Two apprentices.

Shojin, bleeding but beaming, created a massive fireball. “Eat this, you overgrown mutt!”

Kokan, seeing the beast focus entirely on Shojin, prepared his strongest Tide Cutter, aiming for its other leg.

The beast, enraged and injured, gathered itself for a final, crushing pounce towards Shojin.

And throughout it all, Scarlett of Sylax slept peacefully against her tree, a single, contented smile on her face, as the roar of the Dark Lord and the shouts of her students played her a lullaby. The chapter ends with the beast in mid-air, leaping towards a grinning, bloodied Shojin, Kokan shouting a warning, and the "nap" far from over.

Chapter 24: The Untamed Master Awakens

The world had narrowed to a tunnel of pain, adrenaline, and the monstrous, snarling face of the Dark Lord Beast. Shojin and Kokan stood back-to-back, their breaths coming in ragged, bloody gasps. Shojin's left arm hung at a funny angle, and a deep gash on his forehead dripped crimson into his eye. Kokan favored his right leg, his clothes torn, a nasty bruise already blooming across his ribs.

The beast wasn't faring perfectly either. One of its eyes was swollen shut from a lucky Phoenix Blaze, and it limped heavily on the leg Kokan had hamstrung, black, tar-like blood oozing from the wound. But its rage was undiminished. It was like fighting a hurricane made of teeth and hatred.

"I… think… I'm running out of fire, bro…" Shojin panted, his flames sputtering weakly around his fists.

"My water… is almost gone…" Kokan admitted, his voice strained. "We can't keep this up."

The beast seemed to sense their weakening resolve. It reared back, its maw opening wide. A vortex of dark, crackling energy—a pure concentration of blighted malice—began to form between its jaws. The air hummed with lethal power. This was it. A Dark Aura Ball. An attack that would erase them from existence.

Shojin gritted his teeth, raising a feeble, flaming fist. "Well… it was a good fight…" Kokan closed his eyes,a single, calm thought of his sister in his mind.

But the obliteration never came.

Instead, a wind picked up. Not a natural forest breeze, but a conscious, powerful gust that wrapped around them like a protective cocoon. It was gentle yet impossibly strong, smelling of distant rain and clean air. It lifted them off their feet as if they were leaves, pulling them back and away from the point of impact, depositing them gently but firmly behind the line of stunned royal guards.

The Dark Aura Ball shot forward, exploding exactly where they had been standing with a deafening BOOM that tore a crater into the earth.

Shojin and Kokan lay on the ground, bewildered, saved by a wind that had come from nowhere.

"What… what was that?" Shojin mumbled, spitting out dirt.

Kokan’s analytical mind raced. Wind. Sudden, precise, powerful wind. His eyes, wide with dawning realization, shot across the clearing to the gnarled oak tree.

The spot was empty.

Scarlett was gone.

A lazy, familiar voice, dripping with amusement, echoed from the heart of the clearing, right next to the confused beast.

“Aww, look at you two. All tuckered out.”

They looked. Scarlett was there, leaning casually against the beast’s uninjured front leg as if it were a porch post. She reached up and patted its matted fur. “You put on a good show for them, didn’t you, doggy? Got them all nice and bloody. Excellent practice.”

The beast, utterly confused by this tiny, unafraid thing suddenly touching it, froze mid-snarl.

Scarlett smiled and vanished into a wisp of shadow, reappearing instantly between her two kneeling apprentices. She ruffled Shojin’s bloody hair and tapped Kokan’s chin with her finger.

“But my wildies…” she said, her voice softening from its mocking tone to one of genuine, fierce pride. “You did good. You held your own against a Class-A nightmare. I’m not just proud. I’m impressed.”

Before they could even process her words, she was gone again, leaving only a faint scent of ozone and a dissipating shadow.

She reappeared in front of the beast, which was now shaking its head in furious confusion. “Alright, mutt,” Scarlett said, cracking her neck. “Playtime’s over. My students need a nap, and you’re being a noisy neighbor.”

What followed was not a battle. It was a masterclass. A taunt.

The beast swiped at her. Scarlett didn’t dodge; she flowed. She became a shadow, a slip of darkness between its claws. She ran up its arm, kicked off its snout, and landed behind it.

“Too slow.” It whipped around,its spiked tail scything toward her. Scarlett backflipped over it, landing gracefully on the tail itself, running up its length like it was a balance beam before leaping off. “Predictable.” It tried to crush her with its bulk.She simply wasn’t there, appearing on a tree branch above, yawning. “Boring.”

The royal guards could only watch, their weapons hanging limply at their sides. Tharvok’s mind was reeling. He was witnessing a level of combat he didn’t know was possible. It was art. It was terror. It was beautiful.

Shojin was practically vibrating with excitement, despite his injuries. “Did you see that?! She’s so cool!” Kokan just stared,his brain trying and failing to catalog the impossible physics of her movements.

After about thirty seconds of this, the beast was panting, enraged, and completely unable to touch her. Scarlett landed in front of it one final time, a bored expression on her face.

“Ohh, sorry, doggy. It was fun to play with you, really. But all good things must come to an end.”

Her demeanor shifted. The laziness vanished. In its place was a terrifying, serene seriousness. Her crimson eyes glowed with an inner light.

The beast, sensing the change, gathered itself for one final, desperate lunge.

Scarlett didn’t move. She simply raised her hand, palm open.

And the wind answered.

It wasn’t a gust this time. It was a localized hurricane. A vortex of compressed, screaming air focused entirely on the beast. It couldn’t move. It couldn’t roar. It was held in place by the unimaginable pressure.

Scarlett made a slight closing motion with her fist.

The compressed wind contracted.

There was a sound like a thousand bones snapping at once. The Dark Lord Beast didn’t even have time to scream. It was imploded into a sphere of mangled fur, bone, and dark energy no larger than a wagon wheel.

Scarlett flicked her wrist. The sphere of compressed nightmare was flung deep into the fog-shrouded woods, disappearing from sight. A distant thump signaled its landing.

Silence.

The entire fight, from her first intervention to the beast’s utter annihilation, had taken forty seconds.

Scarlett brushed a speck of imaginary dust off her shoulder. The serene seriousness was gone, replaced by her usual grumpy expression. She walked back over to her students, who were still kneeling on the ground, their mouths wide open.

The clearing was dead quiet. The only sound was the faint rustle of leaves in the wind. The wind.

Tharvok was the first to break the silence, his voice full of awe. “The wind… you commanded the wind itself. But… that is a power of legend. A divine…”

Scarlett cut him off with a wave of her hand, not looking at him. “It was a breezy day. Don’t read into it.” She focused on Shojin and Kokan. “Alright, you two. Naptime’s over. On your feet. Hinata’s not here, so we’ll have to patch you up the old-fashioned way. Which means it’s gonna hurt. A lot.”

Bram was staring at the spot where the beast had vanished, then at Scarlett, his face pale. All his arrogance had been completely and utterly vaporized. He looked like he might be sick.

Prince Orvyn, safe within the circle of guards, looked at Scarlett not with fear, but with starry-eyed wonder. “You… you exploded it…”

Shojin, despite his pain, managed a weak cheer. “That was SO AWESOME! YOU USED WIND! SINCE WHEN DO YOU USE WIND?!”

Kokan just continued to stare, the puzzle pieces of Lady Lina’s words, the mysterious thirteenth founder, and his master’s impossible power clicking together in his mind, forming a picture that was both terrifying and awe-inspiring.

Scarlett ignored all of them, hauling Shojin to his feet with a grunt. “Since always. Now shut up and let’s find some water to clean these wounds before they get infected. And someone see if any of that jerky survived. I’m starving.”

The Untamed Master had awoken, and for a brief, glorious, and terrifying forty seconds, she had reminded the world why some legends were best left untamed.

Chapter 25: The Heart of Lunara

The aftermath of the battle was a scene of controlled chaos. Scarlett, with a practicality born of millennia of adventure, tore strips from the least-damaged part of Bram's fancy cloak to fashion makeshift bandages.

"Hey! This is regulation issue!" Bram protested weakly, still shell-shocked from watching a beast get imploded.

"And now it's 'blood-soaked and functional' issue," Scarlett retorted, not even looking up as she tightly bound Shojin's wounded arm, making him yelp. "Suck it up, dragon-boy. Pain is just weakness leaving the body. Or something like that. I wasn't really listening when they said it."

Kokan sat stiffly as she cleaned the gash on his ribs with a surprisingly gentle touch, despite using a splash of their dwindling water supply. "It is… efficient," he muttered, wincing.

"It's gonna sting worse tomorrow," she said with a grim smile. "Consider it a lesson in pain management."

Tharvok returned from assessing the damage, his face grim. "The carriage is firewood. The supplies are ash and splinters. We have what's in our personal packs, which isn't much. We need shelter. Now. This part of the forest is not safe after dark."

Scarlett finished tying off Kokan's bandage and stood, brushing her hands on her pants. "Huh!? A cave!? Understood!" she said, as if he'd just given her a brilliant idea. "General, I know a place. It's not far. Right in the mid-section of the jungle."

Tharvok blinked. "Guild Master, with all respect, our map is destroyed. How can you be certain?"

"Maybe we'll get lucky and find some supplies there," she said evasively, a strange, almost nervous energy humming beneath her usual lazy demeanor. "And it's safe. Safer than out here. Come on."

She started walking without waiting for a consensus.

"How do you know this?" Veyra the Naga hissed, her senses on high alert.

Scarlett didn't turn around. "Shut up and follow me. Your Highness," she added, glancing back at Prince Orvyn, "sorry for the lack of protocol. For now, you're not a prince. You're an adventurer. And adventurers survive. Shojin, Kokan, you're on prince-duty. Stick to him like glue. If anything so much as looks at him funny, set it on fire or freeze it solid. Understood?"

“YES, MASTER!” Shojin yelled, puffing out his chest despite his injuries. Kokan gave a sharp, determined nod.

They followed her deeper into the Lunara Wilds. Scarlett’s navigation was unnervingly confident. She took turns without hesitation, pushed aside specific vines, and stepped over hidden roots as if she’d walked this path ten thousand times.

“It’s like she has a map in her head,” Korvath the Dwarf grumbled, impressed despite himself.

After a half-hour of walking, Scarlett stopped at a seemingly random wall of thick ivy and ancient rock. She whispered to herself, “As I remember… it has to be here…” She ran her hands over the stone, feeling for something. “Ah. There.”

She pushed against a specific, moss-covered stone. With a deep, grinding rumble that sounded like it hadn’t been heard in centuries, a section of the rock wall slid sideways, revealing a dark entrance.

“Come on,” she said, her voice tight with an emotion no one could quite place. Excitement? Nerves?

They filed inside, their eyes adjusting to the dim light. It wasn’t a cave. It was a home. An ancient, abandoned one, carved into the living rock of the forest. There was a main living area with stone benches and a cold fireplace, shelves carved into the walls, and even a rusted cooking pot hanging from a hook.

“Wow…” Prince Orvyn breathed, his royal composure forgotten. “Is… is someone living here?”

“Nope,” Scarlett said, her voice echoing softly in the chamber.

Tharvok was examining the walls, his brow furrowed. “This craftsmanship… it’s ancient. But there’s no record of any settlement or dwelling in this part of the Wilds on any map.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Scarlett said, a little too quickly. “Just make yourselves at home. Bram, Tharvok, check the perimeter. Make sure we’re alone.” It was a dismissal.

As the guards spread out, marveling at the hidden sanctuary, Scarlett slipped away to a smaller side chamber. Feyla the Fairy zipped after her, peeking in.

“Ooh! A storage room!” she chirped. “And… it’s full! Look! Dried meats, jars of preserves, old but clean waterskins! It’s like someone just left it yesterday!”

Scarlett was standing in the middle of the room, a distant look in her eyes. “I found it during a quest… some years back. Must have been a hermit. Got lucky.”

Tharvok, who had followed the sound of Feyla's voice, stood in the doorway. He didn't say anything, but his expression was clear. He didn't believe her. The certainty in her pathfinding, the intimate knowledge of this place… it spoke of more than just stumbling upon it.

Night fell properly, and the group huddled in the main chamber, sharing the discovered food. It was simple but nourishing. The mood was somber but grateful.

Everyone was there except two.

"Where's the Guild Master?" Tharvok asked. "And the broody one?"Bram added. Shojin shrugged,mouth full of dried fruit. "Dunno. Probably scouting. She does that."

Under the silver light of the full moon, the ancient forest was transformed. It was no longer a place of terror, but one of profound, aching beauty.

Scarlett moved through the trees with a silent grace she rarely showed, coming to a stop in a small, hidden clearing. Moonlight streamed down, illuminating a simple, well-kept stone marker. Etched into it was a single name: Elara.

She sank to her knees before it, her shoulders slumping for the first time all day. The weight of millennia, of leadership, of her secret, fell away, leaving just a daughter visiting her mother.

"Hey, Mom," she whispered, her voice thick with an emotion she never let anyone see. "I hope you're alright up there." She looked up at the twinkling stars. "What am I thinking? Of course you are. You're probably organizing the clouds by fluffiness and teaching the angels how to bake those terrible, burnt cookies you always made."

A soft, choked laugh escaped her. "Sis is with you too, I bet. Driving you crazy with her need to organize everything. Just like always." She traced the letters of the name on the stone. "Mom… you know the barrier is failing. Sylph died for it. She gave everything to build it… and I'm… I'm not able to do anything to stop it from crumbling now. I'm just… me. The wild one. The untamed one. What good is that?"

She didn't hear the soft crunch of a leaf behind her.

From behind a thick oak tree, Kokan watched, his heart hammering against his ribs. He had followed her, a nagging feeling pulling him forward. And now… he understood. Elara.Their mother's name. Sylph.The founder. Her twin sister. The divine wind. Lady Lina's words:"Only three of us are left." The history books:Twelve founders.

The pieces slammed together in his mind with the force of a thunderclap. His breath hitched. It was impossible. It was unbelievable.

It was the only thing that made sense.

He stepped out from behind the tree. “Master?”

Scarlett didn’t jump. She didn’t even turn around. She just sighed, a sound of deep, weary resignation. “So. Now you know who I am, huh?”

Kokan walked forward slowly and sat down cross-legged beside her, facing the grave. His voice was barely a whisper. “So… I am not thinking wrong. Can you… explain it to me? In detail?”

Scarlett looked at him, her crimson eyes reflecting the moonlight. There was no anger there. Only a deep, ancient sadness. “You are really like your grandmother Lydia. Too smart for your own good.”

He looked at her, his own stormy eyes wide. “So… it’s true. You know my grandma. And you… you are… the thirteenth member of the Covenant Order.”

She held his gaze. “Yes.”

The word hung in the silent, holy air of the clearing. Kokan felt the world tilt on its axis. “I… I can’t believe this.”

“I know,” Scarlett said softly. “It’s a lot to swallow. But you have to promise me, Kokan. You can’t tell anyone. Not Shojin, not the prince, not anyone. This secret… it’s not just mine to keep. It’s for everyone’s protection.”

Kokan stared at her, a flicker of indignation in his eyes. “Do you really think I am an idiot? You have been hiding this for millennia, and you think I will just spill it? You think that little of your student, Sensei?” He straightened his back. “I promise. I will not tell a soul.”

A genuine, warm smile touched Scarlett’s lips—a rare, unguarded sight. “Ohh, my little coldy. You really are something else.” She reached out and ruffled his hair, just like she did with Shojin.

Emboldened, Kokan gestured to the grave. “May I ask… who is this?”

“My mother,” Scarlett said, her voice soft again. “Elara.”

“Ohh,” he whispered. “And… Sylph was your…”

“Twin sister,” Scarlett finished. “Yes.”

He simply nodded, the last confirmation settling the last piece of the puzzle. He didn’t need to question it. The divine wind he’d witnessed was proof enough.

“So… this was your house?” he asked, looking around the clearing.

“Yes,” she said, a nostalgic smile gracing her features. “Mine, Sylph’s, and our father’s. We lived here. Hid here. It was the only safe place for hybrids like us during the wars.”

“You both had this… divine wind?”

Scarlett nodded, looking up at the stars as if reading the story from them. “Our mother, Elara… she was too kind for her own good. Always saving others.” Her voice grew distant, recounting the legend as a personal memory. “One day, the Goddess of Wind, Fujin, grew weak and descended to earth. The world was bleeding from endless war. She was attacked. A knight lunged with a killing blow.”

Kokan listened, enthralled.

“My mother… she threw herself between the blade and the goddess.” Scarlett’s voice cracked slightly. “Steel tore through her. She died… but with two children, me and Sylph, still in her womb.” She took a shaky breath. “The goddess… she was so grief-stricken, so indebted… she used the last of her power. She transferred our unborn lives into her own divine womb. She carried us. She gave birth to us. That’s why we inherited her divine wind. A piece of her power, and a piece of our mother’s sacrifice, lives on in us.”

They talked through the night. Scarlett told stories of a childhood spent in these woods, of a strict but loving shadow-elf father, of a twin sister who dreamed of peace while she dreamed of freedom. She spoke of the founding of Sylphania, of the friends they lost, of the weight of a legend she never wanted.

Kokan listened, asking quiet questions, his usual cold demeanor melted away by the warmth of her trust and the magnitude of her story.

Back in the ancient house, the others slept, unaware that the mysterious thirteenth founder, the sister of their kingdom’s creator, was not a ghost in a history book, but their own grumpy, chaotic, and unbelievably powerful guild master, sharing her heart under the moonlight with her newest student, in the heart of the forest she once called home. For them, the mystery remained. But for Kokan and Scarlett, a new, profound understanding had been forged, as unbreakable as the bedrock of Lunara itself.

Chapter 26: The Path Ahead

Dawn in the hidden house was a quiet, dusty affair. Sunbeams sliced through cracks in the ancient stone, illuminating motes of dust dancing in the air like forgotten memories. The scent of old stone and dried herbs was a strange, comforting contrast to the lingering adrenaline of the previous day.

One by one, the party stirred. The royal guards woke with disciplined silence, rolling their bedrolls with practiced efficiency. The Sylax contingent, predictably, was less orderly.

Shojin shot up from his bedroll with a gasp, immediately wincing and clutching his bandaged arm. “I dreamed I was a meatball! A giant, walking meatball! And the doggy was back!”

Kokan was already awake, sitting stiffly against a wall. His body ached, but his mind was a whirlwind. The revelations of the night before played on a loop in his head. Every glance he stole at Scarlett—who was calmly sharpening a dagger on a whetstone she’d produced from seemingly nowhere—was now viewed through a new, awe-filled lens. The thirteenth founder. Sister of Sylph. Daughter of a goddess and a legend. He watched her yawn, a lazy, cat-like stretch, and the sheer normality of it amidst the monumental truth was almost dizzying.

“Alright, you pack of misfits!” Scarlett announced, her voice echoing in the chamber as she stood and sheathed her dagger with a dramatic flourish. “The free lodging was nice, but we’ve got a prince to deliver! Let’s gooo!”

It was less a command and more a declaration of impending chaos. The royal guards looked mildly alarmed by the volume.

They salvaged what they could from the house—a few more waterskins, some additional dried rations that Scarlett “just happened” to find in a second, even more hidden cupboard. Tharvok oversaw the distribution, his voice a calm, steady rumble.

“Draeven, you will carry the extra waterskins.”
Bram’s face fell.“But Chief, my back is still—”
“Is still attached to your body,which is more than can be said for our carriage,” Tharvok replied, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Consider it a lesson in humility.”

As they filed out of the hidden entrance, Scarlett paused, her hand resting on the stone doorframe for a moment longer than necessary. It was a subtle gesture, but Kokan saw it. A silent goodbye to a home she hadn’t seen in millennia.

The journey through the rest of the Lunara Wilds felt different. The terror of the Dark Lord Beast was gone, replaced by the mundane challenges of a difficult trek. The path was still treacherous, but Scarlett’s guidance was now accepted as absolute gospel. When she said, “That patch of moss is hiding a root that will trip you,” nobody, not even Bram, questioned it.

Tharvok walked beside her, his massive Oni frame a stark contrast to her lithe shadow-elf form.
“Your knowledge of this forest continues to be…remarkable, Guild Master,” he said, his voice low. “It saved us days of travel. Perhaps more.”
Scarlett kept her eyes forward,a smirk playing on her lips. “What can I say? I’m a woman of many talents. Unlike some people who only have one talent, like… brooding dramatically.”
She glanced back at Bram, who was struggling under the weight of the waterskins.
Tharvok chuckled,a deep, warm sound. “A versatile skill, to be sure. But I prefer talents that involve saving princes and imploding monsters. They have a certain… practical flair.”

It wasn’t overt flirting. It was a dance of mutual respect and subtle appreciation, a conversation happening just beneath the words. Scarlett didn’t blush, but her smirk widened a fraction.

Meanwhile, the “prince-duty” trio was having an adventure of their own.

“So, Orvyn,” Shojin said, bounding along despite his injuries, “what’s the first thing you’re gonna do when you get home?”
Prince Orvyn,his fine clothes now dusty and torn, actually seemed to be considering it. “I… I believe I shall tell my sister that I made friends. And that one of them tried to feed a hallucinogenic flower.”
“And that the other one imploded a monster with wind!”Shojin added cheerfully.
Kokan,walking silently beside them, flinched. “Shojin. We do not… speak of that.”
“Why not?It was awesome!”
“It is…classified,” Kokan said, shooting a nervous glance at Scarlett’s back.
Orvyn looked between them,a genuine smile on his face. “It is alright. Your master’s secrets are safe with me. As are my new friends.” The word “friends” felt foreign but wonderful on his tongue.

Bram, overhearing this, muttered to Ignis, “Friends. He’s making friends with the chaos gremlins. The kingdom is doomed.”
Ignis merely flickered,which Bram took as agreement.

The forest began to change. The ancient, dense canopy started to thin. The air grew warmer and drier. The twisted, gnarled trees of the deep wilds gave way to taller, straighter pines and sun-dappled clearings.

“We’re nearing the edge,” Scarlett announced, her pace quickening with a tangible excitement. “The Wilds are almost behind us.”

The mood of the entire group lifted. The end was in sight. They pushed on, the injuries and exhaustion forgotten in the face of their goal.

Shojin, fueled by pure adrenaline, started a one-sided competition with a squirrel, trying to out-climb it. He failed, of course, tumbling out of a tree and into a bush, but he popped up laughing.

Kokan,though still lost in thought, found himself subtly using his water magic to create a cool mist around their little group, a small comfort against the growing heat. Orvyn watched the simple magic with delight.
Even Bram's grumbling lessened as the end of his water-carrying ordeal grew near.

They crested a final, rocky ridge, pushing through a curtain of flowering vines.

And there it was.

Spread out in the valley below, nestled between two towering, emerald-green mountains, was the Kingdom of Zyvarra. It wasn't like the gleaming white spires of Sylphania. Zyvarra was carved. Its buildings were hewn from the living rock of the mountains themselves, their structures flowing in elegant, serpentine curves. Bridges of woven stone arched between peaks, and waterfalls cascaded down cliff faces, catching the afternoon sun in brilliant rainbows. Banners of deep green and gold fluttered from towers that spiraled towards the sky. It was a kingdom that wasn't built upon the land, but woven into it.

For a long moment, no one spoke. The sight was breathtaking.

Shojin's jaw was on the floor. "Whoa…"
Kokan simply stared,his analytical mind quiet for once, just absorbing the beauty.
Prince Orvyn stood a little taller,a proud, relieved smile on his face. "Home."

Tharvok came to stand beside Scarlett, his gaze also fixed on the kingdom below. "We made it," he said, his voice full of quiet satisfaction. "Thanks to you."

Scarlett looked out at the vista, her crimson eyes reflecting the emerald city. The grumpy guild master was gone, replaced for a moment by the seasoned adventurer who had seen countless wonders. A slow, genuine smile spread across her face.

"Yeah," she said, her voice softer than usual. "We did. Now let's go get your prince married off so I can get paid. I've got a guild hall to restock, and I hear Bram owes me a new cloak."

The path ahead was clear, and for the first time since they'd stepped beyond the barrier, it was paved not with fear, but with hope, and the promise of a story worth telling.

Chapter 27: The Royal Welcome

The moment they passed through the grand, serpentine gates of Zyvarra, the world transformed. The wild, untamed air of the Lunara forest was replaced by the scent of exotic spices, blooming night-blooming flowers, and polished stone. The city was a marvel of organic architecture. Buildings weren't constructed; they were sculpted, flowing into one another like a stone river. Staircases spiraled around massive, living trees, and canals of clear water wove through the streets, filled with luminous fish.

People stopped and stared as their ragged procession moved through the city. Whispers rippled through the crowds like wind through leaves.

"Is that Prince Orvyn?"
"By the Serpent's scale,look at his clothes!"
"He looks...wild!"
"And who are they?Those strange ones with him!"

The prince, for his part, seemed to shrink slightly under the scrutiny, his dusty, torn tunic a stark contrast to the pristine, elegant attire of the Zyvarran citizens.

They ascended through the city, following a wide, processional road that led to the castle itself. If the city was impressive, the castle was breathtaking. It was carved directly into the central mountain peak, its towers like polished fangs against the sky, its bridges delicate as spider silk. Guards in emerald armor, scales polished to a high shine, stood at attention, their eyes widening almost imperceptibly at the state of their returning prince and his unusual entourage.

They were led into the Royal Grand Hall. The ceiling soared overhead, held up by pillars carved to look like coiling serpents. At the far end, on a throne of woven jade and gold, sat a man with the same sharp, intelligent features as Orvyn, though his hair was shot with silver and his bearing was one of immense, weary authority. This was King Caspian.

As one, the royal guard, Tharvok, and Prince Orvyn dropped into deep, formal bows.

Sylax did not.

Scarlett stood tall, her hands on her hips, looking around the hall with a critical, appraising eye, as if judging a potential tavern. Shojin was gaping, spinning in a slow circle, his head craned back. "WHOA! This place is bigger than our whole guild hall! Look at the shiny snake-things!" Kokan stood stiffly beside him, trying to maintain some dignity but equally awestruck.

Tharvok looked up, aghast. "Guild Master!" he hissed. "Show respect!"

King Caspian stood, his expression unreadable. "Rise," he commanded, his voice echoing in the hall. His eyes fell on Scarlett. "And who, my lady, are you, who stands so boldly in our hall?"

Before Tharvok could formally introduce them, Scarlett gave a casual, two-fingered salute. "Glad to meet you, King Caspian. Name's Scarlett. Scarlett of Sylax. These are my apprentices, the noisy one and the quiet one." She jerked a thumb at Shojin and Kokan.

Tharvok quickly stepped forward, bowing again. "Your Majesty, may I present Guild Master Scarlett of the Untamed Guild of Sylphania, and her companions, Shojin Takeru and Kokan Tohei. They are the ones who saved Prince Orvyn's life in the Lunara Wilds. We would not be here without their... unique methods."

Shojin, unable to contain himself, blurted out, "Yeah! And Granny—I mean, Master—blew up a giant monster dog with WIND! It was SO COOL!"

A stunned silence filled the hall. King Caspian's eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline.

Just then, a side door opened, and a woman of breathtaking grace entered. Her hair was the color of dark jade, and her eyes held a warm, keen intelligence. Beside her was a younger woman, perhaps sixteen, with Orvyn's features but a far more mischievous smile. She was practically vibrating with excitement.

"Caspian? What is all the— Oh! Orvyn!" the woman, Queen Seraphina, rushed forward, embracing her son despite his disheveled state.

"My love, these are our son's rescuers," King Caspian said, recovering his composure.

Queen Seraphina turned to them, her eyes shining with gratitude. "You have our eternal thanks. I am Queen Seraphina Zahrakar. And this," she said, gesturing to the young girl, "is our daughter, Princess Aurelia, the 'Jade Whisper'."

Princess Aurelia curtsied, but her eyes were locked on Shojin's bandages and Kokan's torn clothes with fascination. "You fought a Dark Lord Beast? Truly? Was it horrifying? Was it magnificent?"

"We are in your debt," Queen Seraphina continued. "You must stay for the wedding ceremony. It is the least we can do."

Scarlett waved a hand. "Nah. Thanks, but we're good. We'll rest up and head back to Sylphania in three days. Got a guild to run."

The Queen would not be swayed. "Nonsense! I insist! You are heroes of the realm! To have you at the celebration would be the highest honor. Please, you cannot refuse."

It was a gentle but immovable force. Scarlett looked at the Queen's determined face, then at Tharvok's pleading expression, and let out a long, dramatic sigh that echoed in the grand hall.

"Ugh. Fiiiiine. But we're not wearing fancy clothes."

Prince Orvyn, with a look of immense relief, was quickly ushered away by servants to be "made presentable."

Scarlett then turned to the Queen. "Your Majesty, is there a healer around? My headaches are a bit... dented."

Queen Seraphina clapped her hands, and a knight was dispatched. Soon, an elderly healer with hands that glowed with soft, green energy arrived. She efficiently tended to the guards' minor scrapes before moving to Shojin and Kokan.

Shojin watched in amazement as the gash on his head knitted itself together without a scar. "WHOAH! That's amazing! No stingy potion? No 'walk it off'? This is way better than Master's way!"

Kokan simply nodded his thanks, having expected nothing less from a royal healer. The healer then turned to Scarlett. "And you, Miss? Any injuries?"

Scarlett, who had been leaning against a pillar, shrugged. "I'm good. Just tired of babysitting."

The healer looked her up and down, her magical senses probing. "Indeed. Not a scratch. Most... unusual, given the company you keep."

Scarlett ignored the comment, and they were led to their guest quarters. Kokan and Shojin were given a room the size of the entire Sylax main hall, with beds so soft Shojin immediately started jumping on his.

"Bro! This is like sleeping on a cloud! A cloud that doesn't try to eat you!"

Kokan, sitting on the edge of his own bed, finally allowed himself a small smile. "It is... adequate."

Later, after they had rested, Prince Orvyn—now bathed, groomed, and dressed in immaculate emerald silks—came to fetch them for a tour. Shojin's reactions were a spectacle in themselves.

"LOOK! A statue of a guy with a fish tail! Is that your grandpa?"
"Whoa!Are those real jewels in the floor? Can I take one?"
"Hey,Orvyn, does this big vase thing come with free refills?"

Kokan followed, his mind whirling. He saw the history, the strategy behind the castle's defensible position, the subtle water channels used for both decoration and cooling. He was seeing a kingdom, not just a castle.

Meanwhile, Queen Seraphina personally showed Scarlett to a spacious suite with a balcony overlooking the entire city.

"We cannot thank you enough, Guild Master," the Queen said, her hospitality as warm and solid as the mountain itself. "Your name will be sung in our halls for generations."

Scarlett, for once, seemed slightly disarmed by the genuine kindness. "Yeah, well. Just doing our job. Your kid's not bad. A bit stiff, but he loosened up."

As the sun set, painting the serpentine towers in shades of orange and purple, the entire group felt the strange contrast. They were untamed souls in the heart of the most ordered place they had ever seen. But for now, surrounded by astonishing hospitality and the buzz of an impending wedding, the chaos felt... welcome. The grand hall was being decorated with luminous fungi and glowing crystals, and for the first time, the Untamed Guild of Sylphania was about to experience a royal celebration.

Chapter 28: The Royal Wedding

As dusk settled over Zyvarra, the castle began to shimmer. Thousands of luminous crystals and glowing fungi embedded in the serpentine architecture flared to life, transforming the stronghold into a constellation carved from the mountain itself. The Grand Hall, now the wedding venue, was a breathtaking sight. Cascading waterfalls of light flowed down the walls, and the air hummed with the music of stringed instruments and the murmur of arriving nobility.

Prince Orvyn, looking regal and relieved, stood at the entrance with his two "honorary guards." Kokan, in a borrowed nobleman's tunic and trousers that fit him surprisingly well, stood stiffly at his side, offering polite, if clipped, bows to the guests. "Welcome. The royal family thanks you for your presence."

Shojin, on the other hand, was a spectacle. Dressed in similar finery, he looked like a feral cat that had been stuffed into a silk bag.

A duchess with a headdress of towering pearls approached. "Such a joyous occasion," she simpered.

"WHOAH!" Shojin yelled, pointing. "Are those things on your head real? What if one falls off? Could it, like, roll away? We could have a pearl hunt!"

The duchess stared, speechless. Kokan swiftly stepped on Shojin's foot. "He means to say your headdress is... remarkably secure, Your Grace," Kokan said, dragging a protesting Shojin away.

Next came a lord with an elaborate, waxed mustache that curled at the ends. Shojin squinted. "Hey, mister. Does that thing get in your soup? Does it have its own name?"

Prince Orvyn had to fake a coughing fit to hide his laughter. Kokan looked like he was considering jumping into one of the decorative canals.

After what felt like an eternity of this, the boys finally got a break, slumping against a pillar. But their respite was short-lived. A giggling whisper turned into a murmur, then a swarm. A group of noble daughters, having spotted the two handsome, exotic strangers from Sylphania, descended upon them like beautifully dressed piranhas.

"Ooh, you're the adventurers!"
"You saved the prince!How brave!"
"Your eyes are so stormy!"
"Your hair is so...energetically messy!"

They were surrounded. A wall of silk, perfume, and batting eyelashes. For twenty agonizing minutes, Kokan and Shojin were trapped, giving one-word answers and trying to subtly back away, only to find more girls behind them. It was a different kind of battle, and one for which they were utterly unprepared. They finally managed to escape by Shojin pretending to see a "rare, flying jewel-beetle" and pointing wildly at the ceiling, creating a diversion.

Meanwhile, in the bridal chamber, chaos of a more refined sort reigned. Princess Lyssara sat before a grand mirror, surrounded by a flock of dressers and makeup artists. Scarlett leaned against the wall, watching the proceedings with a look of profound boredom, still in her practical crop top, trousers, and worn travel cloak.

Princess Lyssara caught her reflection in the mirror. "Lady Scarlett," she said, her voice gentle but firm. "Are you planning to attend my wedding in that... outfit?"

Scarlett shrugged. "It's comfortable. It's what I have."

Lyssara stood up, a sudden, regal authority in her stance. "Everyone out," she commanded. The flock of attendants scurried away, bowing. Once they were alone, Lyssara turned to Scarlett, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "It is my wedding day. And no one, especially not the woman who saved my brother, is going to attend looking like she's about to go wrestle a bear. No excuses."

Scarlett opened her mouth to protest, but Lyssara was already moving. "But—"

"No 'buts'," Lyssara said, and with a determined smile, she reached up and unclasped Scarlett's cloak. It fell to the floor. Before Scarlett could react, Lyssara was guiding her towards a rack of exquisite gowns. Scarlett, for the first time in living memory, found herself blushing, utterly out of her element.

Back in the hall, a breathless Kokan and Shojin finally collapsed into chairs at a table where Tharvok and Bram were sitting.

"Whoa," Shojin panted. "Do those girls always do that? It's scarier than the goblin cave!"

Before Tharvok could answer, Bram's jaw dropped. He was staring, transfixed, at the top of the grand staircase. "Look," he whispered, his voice full of disbelief.

Tharvok turned. And froze.

Descending the staircase was Scarlett.

But it wasn't their Scarlett. Not the grumpy, cloak-clad guild master. This Scarlett wore a gown of deep crimson that seemed to drink the light, its fabric flowing like liquid shadow. Her dark hair, usually a wild mane, was styled in an elegant, intricate braid that cascaded over one shoulder, adorned with simple silver pins. A touch of kohl accentuated her crimson eyes, and a single, dark jewel rested at her throat. She was breathtaking.

Tharvok's mind went completely blank. His professional composure, his warrior's focus, evaporated. He could only stare as she descended, a vision of fierce, untamable beauty given form.

She made her way to their table, looking deeply uncomfortable. "This useless dress," she grumbled, fiddling with the fabric. "It's irritating. Ugh."

Both her students stared. "Master," Kokan said, his voice unusually soft. "You look... beautiful."

Shojin just nodded, speechless for once.

Tharvok was still staring. Scarlett noticed his gaze and raised an eyebrow. "Is there something on my face, Warden?"

He finally found his voice, low and sincere. "Beauty."

A faint blush colored Scarlett's cheeks. Before she could retort, Tharvok did something that shocked everyone, including himself. He knelt on one knee before her, a formal, chivalrous gesture. "Guild Master Scarlett," he said, his voice steady despite the storm in his eyes. "Will you do me the honor of this dance?"

Scarlett's eyes widened. She looked at his offered hand, then at the dance floor, then back at his face. After a moment of stunned silence, she placed her hand in his. "You're going to regret this," she muttered.

As he led her to the floor, Scarlett leaned in, her whisper a warm brush against his ear that sent an electric jolt straight down his spine. "I don't know how to dance. I've never danced before."

Tharvock felt his heart hammer against his ribs. He leaned down, his own whisper a low rumble near her ear. "Do not worry, my lady. I will handle it."

The way his breath tickled her skin, the deep timbre of his voice so close—Scarlett felt a flurry of butterflies erupt in her stomach. She blushed a deeper shade of crimson, grateful for the dim light.

As they began to move, it became immediately clear that Scarlett was a disaster on the dance floor. She moved with the grace of a warrior, which was to say, she was all power and no finesse. She stepped on his feet, misjudged turns, and once nearly elbowed a passing duke in the face.

But Tharvok was a rock. He guided her with impossible patience and strength, his movements fluid and sure, turning her missteps into part of their unique rhythm. He never faltered, his gaze locked on hers, a small, captivated smile on his face.

At their table, Veyra nudged Ignis. "Look at them. They look... beautiful together."

Bram sighed, shaking his head. "I want to deny it. I really do. But... I can't."

A flicker of triumph crossed Ignis's fiery form. "So. I was right. I won the bet."

A quick flashback illuminated their minds: The camp in the Lunara Wilds, a few nights prior. Ignis had flickered, "Let us bet. One hundred gold. The General is in love with the Guild Master."

Veyra had immediately said, "I bet yes."
Bram,Korvath, and Feylin had chorused, "No!"
Now,in the present, Ignis gloated. "I won."
Veyra grinned."We both won. You three are paying for our next trip."
The defeated trio nodded,their eyes also glued to the dancing couple, unable to argue.

The wedding ceremony itself was a beautiful blur. When Princess Lyssara entered, radiant on her mother's arm, her eyes scanned the crowd. She saw Tharvok and Scarlett, standing slightly apart from the others, a palpable tension—a good tension—between them. A knowing, happy smile touched her lips before she focused on her waiting groom.

The vows were exchanged, the rings given, and when the priest pronounced them married, the hall erupted in cheers. The newlyweds shared a kiss, sealing their union.

Later, Scarlett collapsed back at the table, fanning herself with a plate. "Ugh. I'm tired." She looked at Tharvok, a genuine apology in her eyes. "And... sorry. For your feet." The memory of her stomping all over them during their dance was vivid.

Tharvok chuckled, rubbing his sore instep. "Ahh, do not worry about it, my lady." Then, in a move of pure, uncalculated impulse, he took her hand, leaned in, and pressed a soft, firm kiss to her knuckles.

Scarlett's blush returned with a vengeance, heating her entire face.

He stood. "Sorry, my dear lady. Duty calls. I must make my rounds." He leaned in again, and before she could process it, he brushed a soft, fleeting kiss against her cheek. Then he was gone, leaving a stunned and furiously blushing Scarlett in his wake.

From the dais, Princess Lyssara watched him go, then looked at the flustered Scarlett. She smiled and whispered to her new husband, "It seems a new, beautiful couple has found each other tonight."

Out on his rounds, Tharvok led his team through the castle grounds. His guards were unusually quiet, whispering and nudging each other behind his back.

Finally, the tiny Feylin zipped in front of him. "General Tharvok!"

He snapped out of his thoughts. "Yes, Feylin?"

The entire team looked at him. Feylin took a deep breath. "We all have to ask you something." A pause. "Are you in Love? I mean... do you love Guild Master Scarlett?"

Silence erupted. Tharvok stopped walking. He moved to a nearby stone bench and sat down, staring up at the moonlit sky. The silence stretched. Then, a slow, soft smile spread across his features, one they had never seen before.

"Maybe," he said, his voice a low rumble filled with wonder, his eyes still fixed on the stars.

Back in the hall, Scarlett was still at the table, her cheeks warm. She was replaying the kiss on her hand, the whisper in her ear, the kiss on her cheek.

Shojin waved a hand in front of her face. "Hey, Granny? What happened? You're all red!"

Kokan swiftly pulled Shojin's hand down. "Do not pester her."

Scarlett was lost in thoughts of a certain Oni Warden, a small, unguarded smile on her lips. Then, as swiftly as a shadow passing over the moon, her smile vanished. Her posture straightened, her senses snapping back to razor-sharp focus. Her crimson eyes, no longer dreamy, scanned the crowded hall with lethal precision.

Kokan felt it too. The shift in her energy was electric. He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a serious, barely audible whisper. "You feel it too?"

Scarlett gave a single, sharp nod, her hand subtly tightening around her fork. "Yes."

Shojin looked between them, confused. "What? What are you talking about?"

Scarlett's voice was a low, dangerous murmur as she took a casual bite of cake. "Act normal," she commanded, her eyes still sweeping the room. "Don't make him—or her—feel we know we're being watched."

The music played on, the laughter continued, but for the Untamed Guild, the celebration was over. The hunt had begun.

Chapter 29: The Silent Intruder

The festive music from the Grand Hall was a distant, mocking hum. Out here, on a secluded balcony overlooking the dark, serpentine sprawl of Zyvarra, the air was cold and sharp. Scarlett's senses, honed over ten thousand years, were stretched taut. The feeling of being watched was a physical pressure against her skin.

"He's still there," she murmured, her voice barely a whisper, her body language deliberately relaxed as she leaned on the balustrade. "We need to know if we're the only targets, or if this is bigger."

Kokan stood rigid beside her, his own instincts screaming. "The energy… it's not just hostile. It's… dark. Ancient."

Shojin, fidgeting, tried to mimic their casual stance and failed miserably. "If this spy guy is after us, why? We didn't do anything! Well, besides blowing up a monster and crashing a wedding…"

"We'll find out soon," Scarlett said, her crimson eyes scanning the moonlit gardens below without seeming to. "We're leaving the crowd. We're heading somewhere open. Isolated. Where he'll have to show himself."

They moved as one, a trio of predators feigning nonchalance. They descended from the castle's main levels, passing through empty courtyards and silent, glowing colonnades, deliberately moving away from the lights and the people. The feeling of being followed was a shadow that clung to them, step for step.

Finally, they reached a training ground on a lower terrace, a wide, flat expanse of hard-packed earth used for royal drills. It was utterly deserted, bathed in the cold light of the moon. The perfect stage.

Scarlett stopped, her back to the darkest corner of the grounds. "Ready," she breathed.

In a movement too fast for the human eye to follow, her hand dipped to her thigh and came up holding a kunai. She didn't look, didn't aim. She simply threw it, the blade whistling as it flew with lethal precision towards the source of the dark pressure.

There was a soft shink as the kunai embedded itself in a stone wall. A figure, cloaked in shadows, had flowed around the spot where it would have struck, moving with an unnatural, liquid grace. It materialized behind them, its voice a smooth, chilling baritone.

"I never knew humans could feel my presence."

Before the words had fully registered, Kokan's mind, colder and sharper than any blade, had

already acted. While Shojin gaped, Kokan subtly summoned moisture from the night air, compressing and freezing it in his palm. In the same motion, he passed the newly formed, razor-edged ice dagger to Scarlett.

With a sudden, explosive burst of speed that made the air crack, Scarlett pivoted. The spy, confident in his evasion, had no time to react. One moment he was speaking, the next the cold kiss of an ice blade was pressed against his throat.

Scarlett's voice was flat, devoid of all its usual lazy humor, resonating with the gravity of millennia. "Who. Are. You."

Shojin, finally recovering, puffed out his chest. "Yeah! Why are you following us?"

Kokan's analysis was swift. "We are not from Zyvarra. We have no political stake here. Why target us?"

The figure in the shadows didn't struggle. A low, appreciative chuckle escaped him. "It means I lost. Very well. Oh, alright. I will answer all your questions… on one condition. You do a task for me afterward."

Scarlett's eyes narrowed. She gave a single, sharp nod of agreement and withdrew the ice blade a fraction.

The figure straightened, pushing back his hood. He had sharp, aristocratic features, pale skin, and eyes the color of dried blood. He was dressed in the immaculate, formal attire of a royal butler, but the aura rolling off him was pure, undiluted demon.

"First of all," Scarlett began, the ice dagger still hovering. "Who are you?"

"Kenzoku Yami," he replied, his voice smooth as silk.

"What race do you belong to? You are not human. Not even humanoid."

He chuckled again. "I always thought humans were weak and foolish. But you… you are different." He sighed, as if conceding a great point. "Very well. I am a demon."

As he spoke the word, his form flickered. For a second, the handsome butler was gone, replaced by a taller, more formidable figure with faint, horn-like protrusions on his brow and a subtle, dark energy that made the air hum. Then the illusion snapped back into place.

Kokan pressed on. "Why were you following us?"

"Because," Yami said, his crimson eyes locking onto Scarlett's, "I think you can help."

Scarlett's smirk was cold. "What type of help could a demon possibly need? And why are you in human territory? This is a long way from home."

“It is a long story,” Yami conceded.

“We have time,” Scarlett said, her tone leaving no room for argument. “Your questions are ‘almost’ complete. Now, tell us everything. Why are you here? Why follow us? Start talking.”

Kenzoku Yami took a slow breath, and his story began to unfold, painting a picture in the cold night air.

“It begins,” Yami said, his voice taking on a distant, narrative quality, “with a Demon Lord. Not a mindless beast of destruction, but a being of immense power and ancient lineage. His name is Shuen Akumao.”

The scene seemed to shift around them, the training ground fading into the memory he was conjuring.

“And it begins with a human woman named Aki Yugure.”

They saw her then, not with their eyes, but in their minds. Aki. Her beauty was not of palaces or finery, but of a fragile, desperate resilience. She was a slave, her spirit broken by a life of relentless toil and punishment, her only crime being her breathtaking beauty that drew the cruel attention of her masters. Exhausted, with nothing but scars and sorrow to her name, she made a decision. She would not die a slave. If she was to die, it would be on her own terms, in a place where no one would ever find her body. She had heard whispers of the Demon Territories—a place of certain, terrifying death.

She fled, and after a harrowing journey, she crossed the border. The very air was different, charged with a malevolent magic. Almost immediately, a foul, multi-limbed creature, drawn by the scent of human despair, lunged for her. Aki closed her eyes, a serene acceptance on her face. This was it. Her final freedom.

The killing blow never came.

There was a roar of fury, a blur of darkness, and the sound of the monster being torn apart. When Aki dared to open her eyes, she saw him.

Shuen Akumao.

He was not a monster. He was… magnificent. Tall, with jet-black hair and eyes that burned with amber fire. His features were sharp and handsome, his power radiating from him in a controlled, terrifying wave. He stared at the frail human woman, confused.

“I saw you had a chance to run,” his voice was a deep, resonant rumble, devoid of the malice she expected. “Why did you not?”

Aki, trembling, met his gaze. Her voice was a whisper, but clear. “I want to die.”

Shuen studied her, the profound sorrow in her eyes, the dignity in her acceptance of death. Something in his ancient, hardened heart stirred—pity, curiosity, something more.

“If you wish to die,” he said, a strange softness entering his tone, “then work for me. Serve in my household. From this proximity, I can keep an eye on you. Your death will be swift, by my hand, when I decide.”

Aki agreed. It was a bargain. A final purpose.

She was brought to his estate, a place of dark, elegant beauty deep within the demon realm. She began her “service,” intentionally making mistakes, dropping priceless vases, burning meals, hoping to provoke the fatal wrath she sought.

But Shuen never raised his voice. He would simply watch her, that same curious, intense look in his amber eyes. He saw through her act. He saw the pain, the intelligence, the strength it took to stand before a Demon Lord and not break.

Weeks turned into months. His cold observation turned into a strange, protective care. He ensured she had the warmest blankets, the most nourishing food. He would find reasons to be near her, asking quiet questions about the human world, listening to her answers with a focus that made her feel, for the first time in her life, truly seen.

One night, a celebration in the demon court left Aki wandering the halls, a rare, potent demon wine making her bold and sorrowful. She found her way to Shuen’s private chambers and stumbled in.

He was there, reading by firelight. He looked up, surprised.

The dam broke. All of Aki’s pain, her past, the reasons she had come here to die, came pouring out in a drunken, tearful torrent. She told him of the beatings, the humiliation, the loneliness, the feeling of being a beautiful object to be used and discarded.

“I know no one could ever accept me,” she sobbed, collapsing to her knees. “I am nothing.”

Shuen was before her in an instant. He didn’t speak. He simply gathered her into his arms, his embrace surprisingly gentle. He held her as she cried, his large hand stroking her hair.

“You are not nothing,” he whispered into her hair, his voice thick with an emotion he didn’t recognize. “You are everything.”

He tilted her chin up. His amber eyes burned into hers, not with demonic fury, but with a fierce, possessive tenderness that stole her breath. He leaned in, and his lips met hers.

It was not a kiss of passion, but of promise. Of acceptance. It was a kiss that sealed her broken pieces back together.

That night, they became one. It was a collision of two lonely souls, a union of human fragility and demonic strength, a night of whispered vows and desperate, loving touches that left them both forever changed.

Some days later, they discovered Aki was pregnant.

The fearsome Demon Lord, the scourge of battlefields, wept with joy. His love for Aki became an all-consuming fire. He hid her away from the politics and dangers of the demon court, cherishing her as his most precious secret.

When their daughter was born, they named her Kurohana Enji. Shuen, holding the tiny half-demon, half-human child, made Yami swear a blood oath. “Protect her, Yami. With your life. She is our future.”

Yami became her shadow, her guardian, her devoted butler. As Enji grew, she was the light of Shuen’s life. She had her mother’s gentle beauty and her father’s fierce spirit. He doted on her, his love a fortress around her.

But tragedy struck. When Enji was five, Aki, her human constitution unable to bear the strain of the demon realm’s energy forever, fell ill and passed away. Shuen’s grief was a cataclysm. His love for his daughter became an obsession. He hid her away even more completely, sheltering her from any possible harm, his overprotectiveness the only way he knew to honor Aki’s memory.

Now, Enji is seventeen. She is a vibrant, curious young woman, but she carries a piece of her human heritage that has become a curse. She has contracted a disease—a purely human ailment that demonic healing magic cannot touch. It is slowly, painfully draining her life force.

Yami’s voice brought them back to the present, the vision of the tragic love story fading. His crimson eyes were filled with a desperate plea.

“I have searched every realm for a cure. I followed you because your power… the way you move, the strength you possess… I sensed something different. Something that might bridge the gap between our worlds. I think you can help me find a way to save her.”

Scarlett was silent for a long moment, the ice dagger in her hand finally melting away. Kokan and Shojin stood in stunned silence, the tale of a demon lord’s heartbreaking love and a daughter’s plight hanging heavily in the air.

Finally, Scarlett nodded. “Alright, demon. You have our attention.”

Chapter 30: The Demon Heir

The journey to the Demon Territories was unlike any they had ever undertaken. Yami, moving with an unnerving silence, led them through hidden paths that seemed to warp the very fabric of space. One moment they were in the moonlit Zyvarran foothills, the next they were stepping through a shimmering, heat-hazed veil into a world painted in shades of twilight and ember.

The air was thick, warm, and carried the scent of brimstone, rare spices, and blooming night-flowers with petals as black as obsidian. Strange, phosphorescent moss clung to twisted, elegant trees, and twin moons—one blood-red, one sickly green—hung in a perpetual dusk sky.

Shojin, of course, was a walking explosion of reactions.
“WHOA!The sky is purple! Is that normal?!”
“Hey,Yami! What’s that squiggly thing with the million eyes? Is it friendly? Can I pet it?!”
“Whoa!That rock just moved! Did you see that? It moved and growled at me!”

Yami, for all his demonic dignity, looked perpetually on the verge of a migraine. “That is a Gaze Stalker. No, you cannot pet it. It considers your eyeballs a delicacy. And that is a Granite Hound. It is not a rock. Please do not attempt to climb it.”

Kokan walked with a quiet, analytical intensity, his blue eyes taking in everything. The architecture they passed was all sharp angles and flowing curves, buildings carved from volcanic rock and inlaid with glowing gems. “The societal structure appears to be clan-based, with a clear hierarchy denoted by the size and ornamentation of the dwellings,” he murmured to himself. “Fascinating.”

Scarlett listened to Yami’s explanations with a seasoned ear, asking sharp, pointed questions about political factions and potential threats. She was still in her crimson gown, which looked absurdly out of place in the demonic landscape, but she carried it with the same lethal grace as her armor.

Finally, they arrived at a secluded, elegant manor built into the side of a dormant volcano. It was shielded by powerful illusions, invisible to any who did not know its precise location. This was Shuen Akumao’s secret sanctuary.

Yami led them inside, through halls decorated with terrifyingly beautiful tapestries depicting epic battles and tragic romances. The air was hushed, tense with worry. He brought them to a heavy obsidian door and pushed it open.

The room within was a surprising blend of demonic grandeur and soft, human comfort. Kurohana Enji lay in a large bed, her form small and fragile against the dark silks. Her hair was a cascade of dark black, fanned out over the pillows, and two small, elegant blood-red horns curved from her forehead. Even in her fevered state, her beauty was striking, a perfect

blend of her parents.

Scarlett moved to the bedside, her movements efficient and devoid of her usual grumpiness. She placed a cool hand on Enji's forehead, then checked her pulse at her wrist. She leaned close, listening to her breathing.

Yami hovered anxiously. "Please, Guild Master. Tell me it is not… it is not a life-threatening disease."

Scarlett straightened up, a look of pure, unadulterated annoyance on her face. She blinked slowly, then pinched the bridge of her nose.

"A life-threatening disease?" she repeated, her voice flat.

Yami nodded, his demonic composure cracking. "Yes! Is she… will she…?"

Scarlett let out a long, exasperated sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the entire stupid situation. "Yami. She has a cold. A slightly bad fever. That's it. It's the sniffles."

The silence in the room was absolute.

Yami stared. "A… a cold?"
"A fever?"Kokan repeated, his own clinical mind struggling to process the anticlimax.
Shojin burst out laughing."ALL THIS FOR A COLD?! WE CAME TO THE DEMON REALM BECAUSE SHE HAS THE SNIFFLES?!"

Yami looked utterly defeated. "But… our healers… our magic… it did nothing!"
"Because it's a human illness,you idiot!" Scarlett snapped, though there was no real heat in it. "Your demonic constitution probably just amplifies the misery. She needs rest, fluids, and something to bring the fever down. Not a realm-spanning quest for a miracle cure."

And so, the legendary Untamed Guild of Sylphania, still dressed in their finest wedding attire, settled in for three days of demonic babysitting.

Shojin was put in charge of "entertainment" and "hydration." It went about as well as expected.
"Hey,Enji! Look! I can make my fire do a little dance!" He'd summon a tiny, wobbly flame on his fingertip, which would then sputter out, making him cough smoke.
He tried to get her to drink water by telling an elaborate,rambling story about a goblin and a wheel of cheese, spilling half the glass in the process.
At one point,he tried to fluff her pillows and accidentally sent one flying across the room, knocking over a very expensive-looking vase. Yami's eye twitched violently.

Kokan, in stark contrast, was a model of efficiency. He used his water magic to gently condense moisture from the air into a cool, refreshing mist around Enji's head, easing her fever. He meticulously prepared a simple broth from the kitchen supplies Yami provided,

measuring everything with scientific precision. He would sit by the bed and read to her from a book of demonic poetry he found, his calm, steady voice a soothing balm.

Scarlett oversaw the operation from a plush armchair, still in her gown, looking like a disgruntled queen. She'd bark orders.
"Fire-brat,stop setting the curtains on fire."
"Coldy,the broth needs less salt. Demons have sensitive palates, or did you forget?"
"Yami,stop hovering. You're letting a draft in."

By the second day, Enji's fever had broken. She awoke, her blood-red eyes fluttering open to see a blue-haired boy in an elegant white suit carefully spoon-feeding her broth, a brown-haired boy in rumpled finery trying to juggle three glowing orbs of light (and failing), and a devastatingly beautiful woman in a crimson gown sharpening a dagger with a critical eye.

"...Hello?" Enji's voice was soft, melodic.

Shojin dropped the orbs, which vanished with a pop. "YOU'RE AWAKE!"
Kokan gently finished feeding her the spoonful."Do not exert yourself. Your fever has just broken."
Scarlett looked over."Took you long enough."

Enji, though weak, managed a small, curious smile. "I am Kurohana Enji. Thank you… for taking care of me." Her gaze lingered on Kokan's blue hair and Shojin's energetic face. "You're not… from here, are you?"

"We're from Sylphania!" Shojin announced proudly. "I'm Shojin Takeru, future greatest adventurer! That's Kokan, he's all serious and smart. And that's our Master, Scarlett! She's super strong and grumpy!"

Enji's smile widened. "A hybrid," she said, looking at Scarlett with a sense of kinship. "Like me. So, you understand. Don't worry about any of this." She gestured vaguely to her horns, which shimmered and vanished, then reappeared again as she concentrated. "I can hide them when I want. It's… useful."

On the third day, Enji was well enough to sit in a chair by the window. The four of them—the demon heir, the fire mage, the water wielder, and the ancient hybrid—spent the day together.

Shojin, having given up on magical entertainment, taught her a complicated (and utterly incorrect) version of a Sylax hand-slapping game, which devolved into laughter.
Kokan showed her how he could make intricate,swirling patterns with water, sculpting tiny ice flowers that melted in her hands.
Enji,in turn, told them stories of growing up in the demon realm, of her father's overprotectiveness, of her mother's memory that Yami kept alive for her.

Yami watched from the doorway, a rare, genuine smile on his face as he brought them trays

of strange, delicious demon fruit and spiced tea. He saw the way Enji's eyes lit up around the two boys, the way the stern Guild Master's expression would occasionally soften.

Kokan, in his pristine white wedding clothes, looked like a prince from a celestial court stranded in the underworld, his calm presence a steady anchor. Shojin, his brown hair perpetually messy, was a whirlwind of life and energy that the quiet manor had never known.

As dusk fell on the third day, Enji was nearly back to full health, her laughter echoing through the halls. The initial mission to save a life from a mythical disease had turned into a three-day slumber party in the Demon Territories. They had come to heal a demon heir, and in the process, had forged a bond that crossed the boundaries of worlds, all while still dressed for a royal wedding. The Untamed Guild had, once again, turned the expected on its head.

Chapter 31: Daughter of the Fallen Flames

The third day in the demon realm had dawned, the perpetual twilight casting long, melancholic shadows through the manor's elegant halls. Scarlett, Kokan, and Shojin, still absurdly clad in their now-wilted wedding finery, stood with Yami and a much-recovered Enji near the grand obsidian door. A sense of quiet, unspoken camaraderie had settled between them.

"Thank you," Enji said, her voice soft but steady. Her blood-red eyes, now clear of fever, held a genuine warmth. "For everything. I... I haven't had friends like you before."

"Anytime, buddy!" Shojin grinned, giving a thumbs-up. "Next time you get the sniffles, just call us! We're experts!"

Kokan offered a small, respectful bow. "It was our honor, Lady Kurohana."

Scarlett just gave a curt nod. "Stay healthy, kid. It's less paperwork for everyone."

They turned towards the door, ready to step back into their own world. But as Yami's hand touched the handle, the door was thrown open from the outside with such force it shuddered on its hinges.

A demon stood there, panting slightly. He was strikingly handsome, with sharp features, jet-black hair, and eyes like smoldering coals. His armor was scarred and travel-stained, and an aura of barely contained power and panic radiated from him. His name was Jakan Diablo, Right Hand of Lord Shuen.

His burning eyes swept the room, instantly locking onto the three humans. In a movement faster than thought, he became a blur of motion. He was behind Shojin in an instant, a wickedly curved demon-steel dagger pressed against the boy's throat.

"WHY ARE HUMANOIDS HERE?!" Jakan's voice was a guttural roar, filled with protective fury.

But he was not the only one who could move fast.

In the same heartbeat, Scarlett was there. Not behind him, but beside him. Her own kunai, produced from some hidden fold of her gown, was pressed against the pulsing vein in Jakan's own neck. Her crimson eyes were colder than the depths of space.

"Let. Him. Go," she commanded, her voice a low, deadly whisper that promised annihilation.

"STOP IT!" Enji's voice cut through the standoff, sharp and commanding. "Both of you! Stop it right now!"

Jakan's eyes flickered to her. "But, my lady—!"

"I said STOP!" Scarlett and Enji yelled in uncanny unison.

Scarlett didn't remove her blade. "Explain. Now."

Yami stepped forward quickly, his hands raised in a placating gesture. "Jakan! Stand down! They are guests! They healed Lady Kurohana!"

Jakan's furious expression morphed into one of confusion. He slowly lowered his dagger from Shojin's throat. Scarlett, after a tense moment, did the same.

"Healed... her?" Jakan repeated, his gaze shifting to Enji, who stood tall and healthy.

"Yes," Yami said firmly. "It was a human ailment. They cured her."

A look of profound shame crossed Jakan's face. He bowed deeply to Scarlett, then to a still-rubbing-his-neck Shojin. "My most profound apologies. I... I acted in haste to protect my lady. I thought you were assassins from the Council."

Scarlett gave a single, sharp nod. "Apology accepted. Misunderstandings happen when you point knives at my students." She sheathed her kunai. "I am Scarlett of Sylax. These are my apprentices."

Jakan straightened. "I am Jakan Diablo. I serve Lord Shuen Akumao." He turned to Enji, a forced, weary smile on his face. "My lady, it gladdens my heart to see you well."

Enji's smile was hesitant. "Jakan... it's good to see you. Where is Father? When is he coming back?"

The question hung in the air. Jakan's smile vanished. His eyes dropped to the floor. A heavy, dreadful silence descended upon the room. Everyone could see the raw grief warring on his face.

He turned his anguished gaze to Yami. "You... you haven't told her?"

Yami looked away, his own composure cracking, a single, traitorous tear escaping to trace a path down his cheek. "I... I could not find the words."

Enji's heart began to hammer against her ribs. The air felt too thick to breathe. "Told me... what?" she whispered, her voice trembling. "Jakan? Look at me. What does Yami have to tell me?"

She took a step forward, her mind screaming denials, praying to any power that would listen that it wasn't what she was suddenly, horrifyingly certain it was.

Jakan refused to meet her eyes. His shoulders began to shake.

Enji's control shattered. She lunged forward, grabbing the front of his armored tunic, her knuckles white. "TELL ME!" she screamed, her voice breaking. "WHAT IS IT?!"

Jakan finally looked at her, and the sheer, unadulterated agony in his eyes was her answer. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He tried again, his voice a broken, choked whisper.

"He... he is killed."

The words were soft, but they hit Enji with the force of a physical blow. Her world tilted. The air left her lungs in a painful gasp.

"No..." The word was a breath, a plea. "No, that's... that's a lie."

Tears, hot and uncontrollable, welled in her eyes and spilled over, streaming down her face. "It's a lie! It has to be a lie!"

"He's gone, my lady," Jakan whispered, his own tears now falling freely. "I am so sorry."

"WHO?!" she shrieked, shaking him, her grief turning to fury. "WHO KILLED HIM?! WHY?!"

Jakan sobbed, a raw, ugly sound. "The Council... The Demon Council... They... they executed him."

"Why?!" she cried, her voice cracking with every word.

"BECAUSE HE MARRIED A HUMAN!" Jakan roared back, his own grief and rage erupting. "BECAUSE HE LOVED YOUR MOTHER! BECAUSE HE WANTED PEACE! AND BECAUSE HE GAVE THEM YOU! HIS MOST PRECIOUS TREASURE! HIS DAUGHTER!"

Enji staggered back as if struck. "But... when they were... where were you?!" she accused, her voice thick with pain and betrayal.

"He was killed right in front of me!" Jakan cried out, his face a mask of torment. He slammed a fist into his own chest. "RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY EYES!"

"THEN WHY COULDN'T YOU SAVE HIM?!" she screamed, grabbing his collar again, shaking him with a strength she didn't know she possessed. "HE WAS MY FATHER! MY FATHER!"

"WHAT DO YOU THINK?!" Jakan yelled back, his voice raw, his composure utterly gone. "HE WASN'T JUST YOUR FATHER! HE RAISED ME! HE WAS MY LORD! MY KING! THE ONLY FAMILY I EVER HAD!"

"THEN WHY?!" she sobbed, her body wracked with tremors.

"BECAUSE HE ORDERED ME TO!" Jakan collapsed to his knees, his great shoulders heaving. "His last command... his final wish... was for me to protect you! To flee! To spy on the Council and keep you safe! What do you think I wanted to do?! I wanted to die with him! But he... he wanted to save you... that's why... AHHH! AH HA HA!" His words devolved into heart-wrenching, broken howls of grief and guilt.

On the other side of the room, Yami stood rigid, tears silently streaming down his face, his butler's composure a shattered illusion. He was drowning in his own failure, his oath to protect the family feeling like a mockery.

Scarlett moved then. She didn't speak. She simply walked to the weeping Enji and placed a firm, steadying hand on her back. It was a simple gesture, but it was an anchor in a storm of despair.

Enji crumbled. The fight went out of her. She turned and buried her face in Scarlett's crimson gown, her small body shaking with the force of her sobs. "It's a lie... I hate them... I hate all demons... I hate myself..." she cried over and over, her voice muffled by the fabric.

Shojin, watching the scene, found tears rolling down his own cheeks, his usual boisterousness replaced by a helpless sorrow. Kokan's face was a pale, stoic mask, but his hands were clenched into fists so tight his knuckles were white, his own pain a silent echo in the room.

Yami moved to Jakan's side, placing a hand on his shuddering shoulder. "It is not your fault, Jakan. It was our Lord's will. He chose your life to ensure hers."

"But I should have been there!" Jakan cried, blaming himself. "I should have died with him!"

Kokan came and stood beside Yami, a silent pillar of support.

After what felt like an eternity, the storm of tears began to subside into exhausted, hiccupping sobs. Scarlett, her own heart feeling the weight of their shared tragedy, spoke softly to her students.

"Kokan, Shojin. Take her to her room. Stay with her."

They nodded, their faces grim. Gently, they guided the broken Enji away, her cries still echoing faintly down the hall.

When they were gone, Scarlett turned to the two grieving demons. Jakan was still on his knees, trying to control his breathing.

"Jakan," Scarlett's voice was low and serious, cutting through his grief. "Why are you here now? What is the reason?"

Jakan looked up, his eyes red-rimmed and hollow. He struggled to find his voice. "Lady Kurohana... her life is in danger. The Council... they have learned of this place. That is why I came. I swore on my life, on my master's blood, that I would save her. It is the duty he gave me. To spy on the Council... and to protect her."

Scarlett was silent for a long moment, processing this. The pieces were falling into a terrifying picture.

"Then you must save yourself," she said finally, her decision made. "Continue your mission. Protect yourself to fulfill your lord's wish. But leave Kurohana to me."

Jakan and Yami stared at her in shock.

"You?" Jakan breathed. "How?"

"I will take her to Sylphania. I will protect her. And from this day forward, she is under my wing. She is a part of Sylax."

"Impossible!" Yami interjected, aghast. "A demon... her dark energy... she could never cross the barrier!"

"But the barrier is weak," Scarlett countered, her voice steady.

Jakan's head snapped up. A horrifying understanding dawned in his tear-filled eyes. His voice was heavy with a new, dreadful realization. "So... that's what it is... I understand now."

Scarlett and Yami looked at him. "What?"

"The demon armies... they aren't just waiting for it to vanish. They are waiting for it to shatter." He looked at Scarlett, his expression grave. "Sylphania is not just a kingdom. It is the lock. The barrier doesn't just protect your land; it seals the largest, most powerful demon realm away from all the others. For millennia, they have been trapped on the other side. If the barrier falls... they won't just conquer Sylphania. They will use it as a gateway to pour into this world, and then into all worlds. It will be the end of everything."

Scarlett listened, and then, to their astonishment, a low chuckle escaped her. It wasn't a sound of mirth, but of cold, defiant fury.

"Hah... Is that what they think?" she said, a slow, dangerous smile spreading across her face. "They think they can conquer Sylphania? My home?" Her crimson eyes blazed with an ancient fire. "Don't worry about their armies. I will protect Kurohana. I want to train her. I will hide her. But in return, you must do the work your lord gave you. Spy on them. Report to me. I am taking her with me."

Jakan and Yami looked at each other, then back at the Guild Master who spoke with the authority of a queen. They saw the unshakable resolve in her eyes.

"As you say," they both whispered, bowing their heads.

"Promise us," Jakan begged, his voice cracking. "Promise you will protect her."

Scarlett met his gaze, her promise as solid as the foundations of the world.

"I promise.”

Chapter 32: Carrying the Broken Flame

The silence in the demon manor was heavy, thick with grief and the echoes of shattered lives. Night had fallen again, the twin moons casting their eerie glow through the windows. In the room they shared, Kokan and Shojin were awake, their own wedding clothes now feeling like costumes from a forgotten play. The memory of Enji's heartbroken sobs and Jakan's tormented roars was a fresh wound in the air.

The door creaked open. Scarlett stood there, her form silhouetted against the dim hallway light. Her crimson gown was the only spot of color in the gloom.

"Get up. We're leaving," she said, her voice flat and final.

Both boys shot to their feet.
"Master,no!" Kokan protested, his usual calm replaced by fierce protectiveness. "We cannot leave her! Not like this! It is not right!"
"Yeah!"Shojin chimed in, his face scrunched in uncharacteristic anger. "She just lost everything! We can't just abandon her! That's… that's what bad guys do!"

They stood their ground, scolding their master for what they saw as a profound cruelty.

Scarlett didn't get angry. She didn't sigh. She simply looked at them, a faint, almost imperceptible glint in her tired eyes. "Who said anything about leaving Kurohana alone?"

The question hung in the air. Kokan and Shojin stared, their righteous anger faltering into confusion.

"W-what?" Shojin stammered. "What do you mean, Master?"

Scarlett ignored them, walking past them and down the hall towards Enji's room. The two boys scrambled after her, their minds racing.

She pushed the door open without knocking. Enji was sitting on the edge of her bed, still in the simple shift she'd worn to sleep. She wasn't crying anymore. She was just… empty. Her blood-red eyes were dry but hollow, staring at nothing. The vibrant young woman they had laughed with mere days ago was gone, replaced by a shell.

Scarlett walked over and stood in front of her. "Kurohana," she said, her voice softer than they had ever heard it. "Will you come with me? Far away from this place. Far away from these demons."

Enji's eyes slowly focused on her. There was no hope in them, only a deep, weary numbness. "Go… with you?" she whispered.

“Yes or no,” Scarlett said, offering no false comfort, no empty promises. Just a choice.

Enji looked at Scarlett’s face, at the unshakable strength in her crimson gaze. She looked past her, at Kokan and Shojin hovering in the doorway, their faces etched with worry. A flicker of something—the faintest memory of warmth—stirred in the icy void of her heart.

“Yes,” she breathed, the word barely audible.

Scarlett gave a single, sharp nod. She turned to her gaping apprentices. “Kurohana is coming with us.”

Shojin’s jaw dropped. “WHAT?!”
Kokan’s eyes widened in shock.“When… when did this happen?”

“Oh, my idiots,” Scarlett said, the familiar lazy grumpiness returning to her voice, a thin mask over the gravity of the situation. “You really can’t keep up. She is now a part of your team. My apprentice. And also a part of Sylax.”

“WHAT?!” they yelled in unison, the news so monumental it briefly overshadowed the surrounding grief.

“But… when? How?” Kokan asked, his analytical mind short-circuiting.

“Now,” Scarlett said, as if announcing they were having soup for dinner. “It’s happening now.” She looked at Enji, whose condition was clearly fragile. “Kokan. Your primary duty on this journey is to keep an eye on Enji. Take care of her. Understand?”

Kokan straightened, his expression shifting from shock to solemn duty. “Yes, Master.”

Shojin bounced forward, his energy returning. “What about me? What’s my job? Do I get to fight any demons that try to follow us? Do I carry the super-secret supplies?”

Scarlett placed a hand on his head, not with affection, but like someone quieting a noisy puppy. “Your job,” she said, “is to stay silent.”

Shojin’s face fell. “Ugh! Master, that’s not possible!”

“We’re leaving. Now,” Scarlett declared, ending the discussion.

She led them out into the hallway, where Jakan and Yami were waiting, their faces grim. The two demons looked at the small, broken girl and the three determined figures from Sylax.

“We’re going,” Scarlett announced.

Jakan stepped forward. “Lady Scarlett… when… how are we to report to you? How can we do this?”

Scarlett looked at him as if he'd asked why the sky was up. "Simply. Come to Sylax."

Both Jakan and Yami stared, aghast. "It is not possible!" Yami insisted. "Our dark energy… the barrier would reject us instantly! It would tear us apart!"

Scarlett rolled her eyes. "Oh, for the love of…" she muttered. Then, she held out her hands. A soft, divine breeze, smelling of rain and clean air, stirred in the stagnant hallway. It coiled around her palms, and two simple, silver-wrought lockets shimmered into existence.

Yami's eyes widened in pure, unadulterated shock. "You… you are a shadow elf and human hybrid! How… how can you command the wind? That is a power of…" He couldn't finish the sentence, the truth dawning on him with terrifying, awesome clarity.

Scarlett's smirk was cryptic. "It's a secret." She tossed a locket to each of them.

Jakan caught his, examining it. "What is this for? How does it allow us to enter Sylphania?"

In a movement faster than he could react, Scarlett's hand flashed out. A small, precise kunai nicked Jakan's finger. A single drop of dark, demonic blood welled up and fell onto the locket. The silver seemed to absorb it, a faint dark swirl appearing within the metal.

"That's it," Scarlett said. She did the same to Yami. "The locket contains your blood. When you wear it and whisper the word 'barrier', an invisible wind barrier will gather around you. It will mask your dark aura, cloak it in the essence of the divine wind. The barrier is weak now. It will be enough to let you pass. But don't forget," she fixed them with a hard stare, "you must be in a perfect human form. No slips."

Jakan and Yami clutched the lockets, feeling the hum of impossible power within them. It was a lifeline, a thread of hope in their dark world.

"Now, you two," Scarlett said, her tone leaving no room for debate. "Do your jobs."

Just then, the rest of the group emerged from the room. Kokan was carrying Enji's small bag, his posture protective. Shojin was practically vibrating with a mixture of sadness and excitement. Enji stood between them, looking small and lost, but she had changed into a dark, practical traveling dress.

Scarlett looked them over. "Good. My dear wildies."

Jakan stepped forward. "I will guide you to the border of Zyvarra. It is the least I can do."

As the five of them—Scarlett, Kokan, Shojin, and the newest, most broken member of their guild, Enji—stepped towards the manor's main door, Jakan and Yami bowed deeply.

The heavy obsidian door shut behind them with a final, resonant thud that felt like the closing of a tomb.

Inside, alone in the silent, empty hallway, Yami's rigid composure finally shattered. He fell to his knees, great, heaving sobs wracking his frame. He wasn't crying for his fallen lord, or for his own failure. He was crying with a desperate, fervent hope.

"I trust you, Lady Scarlett," he whispered into the silence, his voice broken. "Please… please keep her safe."

The journey through the demon realm was a somber, silent affair. Jakan led the way, his presence a grim reminder of the danger they were leaving behind and the one they were carrying with them. Kokan walked steadfastly beside Enji, a silent, steady presence. Shojin walked ahead, his usual chaos subdued, occasionally glancing back with worried eyes. Scarlett walked beside Jakan, her senses alert, her divine wind a subtle shield around their small party.

Enji was silent, but her turmoil was visible. Every strange sound, every shadow, made her flinch. Her breathing would hitch, her hands would tremble. A panic attack would begin to crest, the overwhelming grief and fear threatening to pull her under.

Each time, Kokan was there. He didn't try to hug her or offer empty words. He would simply move a little closer, his calm, blue-eyed gaze a fixed point in her swirling storm. Sometimes, he would summon a tiny, calming mist around her, the cool sensation a gentle shock to her system. Once, as a particularly bad wave of panic hit her, her knees buckled. Kokan's arm was instantly there, a solid support, holding her upright until the wave passed.

They reached the border veils without incident. Jakan stopped, turning to face them one last time. His eyes found Enji's.

"Be strong, my lady," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Your father's spirit walks with you."

He gave Scarlett one last, long look—a look that held a universe of gratitude, fear, and trust—then turned and melted back into the shadows of his world, towards his lonely, dangerous duty.

The four of them stood at the edge of the human world. Behind them was a realm of grief and tyranny. Ahead was an unknown future. Kokan's hand remained a steadying presence on Enji's arm as another tremor ran through her. They had saved a life, but they were carrying a broken flame back to Sylphania, and the wind felt colder than ever before.

Chapter 33: Storms at the Palace

The transition from the oppressive, twilight warmth of the demon realm to the crisp, moonlit air of Zyvarra was jarring. The familiar, serpentine architecture of the city felt almost too bright, too orderly, after the chaotic beauty they had left behind. Kurohana Enji walked silently between Kokan and Shojin, her demonic horns carefully concealed by an illusion, her blood-red eyes downcast. The weight of her grief was a palpable shroud around her.

They hadn't taken ten steps past the main gate when a familiar, booming voice cut through the night.

"SCARLETT!"

General Tharvok Bloodtusk was striding towards them, his emerald armor polished to a high shine, his expression a mixture of immense relief and simmering worry. Bram and Ignis followed close behind, their own faces showing varying degrees of surprise.

Tharvok's eyes found Scarlett, still clad in the now slightly travel-worn but still stunning crimson gown. His gaze swept over her, and a smile that could have powered the entire city broke across his face. He seemed to realize then that four days had passed since the wedding—four days of silence and unexplained absence.

He rushed to her, his large frame coming to a halt just a step away. He completely ignored the new, unknown girl for a moment, his focus entirely on the Guild Master.

"Where in the blazes have you been for the past four days?" he asked, his voice a low, flirty rumble that was both caring and commanding. "We thought you'd grown tired of our hospitality and slipped back to Sylphania without a word."

Scarlett, ever unflappable, opened her mouth to reply. "No, we were—"

But Tharvok's eyes had finally slid to Kurohana. His smile didn't fade, but it became questioning. "And who is this?"

Kokan and Shojin held their breath, their minds racing. Did he sense something? Does he know?

Scarlett didn't miss a beat. Her lie was smooth, delivered with the casual authority of someone stating an obvious fact. "She is my apprentice," she said, gesturing vaguely at Enji. "Kurohana. She also lives in Zyvarra, so we went to visit her. We found her... in a bad state. Her father just passed away." She let a hint of genuine somberness into her tone. "So, we're taking her back to Sylax. For her care. She's joining the guild."

It was a masterful blend of truth and fiction. Tharvok, seeing the genuine grief on the young girl's face and the protective stance of Kokan and Shojin, didn't question it further. His expression softened with immediate sympathy.

"My condolences, child," he said to Enji, his voice gentle. He then turned his attention back to Scarlett. "Come. The Queen and Princess have been... vocal in their concern."

He led them back towards the castle, his presence a shield against any further questions. As they walked, he kept stealing glances at Scarlett, a silent conversation passing between them—relief that she was safe, curiosity about the missing days, and an unspoken warmth that had little to do with guild business.

Their arrival at the castle was met with a storm, but not the kind they expected.

Princess Lyssara, the new bride, descended upon them in a whirlwind of silk and indignation. "YOU!" she exclaimed, her hands on her hips, though a relieved smile fought its way through her scowl. "You vanish from my wedding! For four days! Without a word! Do you have any idea how worried we were? I had half my guards scouring the city! I thought you'd been kidnapped by rival nobles offended by your dancing!"

Prince Orvyn was right behind her, his face breaking into a happy grin at the sight of his friends. "You're alright! We thought you'd left!"

Queen Seraphina glided in, her demeanor calm but her eyes sharp. "Firstly," she said, her voice cutting through her daughter's theatrics, "all of you, go and change. You look like you've been through a war. Then, we will talk."

That was the best news Scarlett had heard all day. She practically fled to her guest chambers. The moment the door closed, she tore off the beautiful, confining gown with a sigh of profound relief. She pulled on her familiar, comfortable crop top, trousers, and cloak, fastening the worn fabric with a sense of coming home. She hugged the soft cloth to her chest for a brief second. "I missed you so much," she whispered to the empty room.

Meanwhile, Tharvok had taken a moment to quietly inform the Queen of the "situation" with the new apprentice, Kurohana, and her tragic loss. The Queen, ever gracious, nodded in understanding.

Once everyone was cleaned up and dressed in their normal attire—a process that took Shojin approximately thirty seconds and involved him putting his old clothes on inside out—they reconvened in the throne room. The mood was more formal now.

King Caspian sat upon his jade throne, his expression grave. "Guild Master Scarlett," he began. "Your return is a relief. But now, we must speak of serious matters. There are... rumours. Whispers on the wind from our scouts and seers."

Scarlett felt a familiar weight settle on her shoulders. She knew what was coming. "Yes," she said, her voice losing all its lazy inflection. "The barrier. It's weaker now."

A tense silence filled the room. The King nodded slowly. "So it is true. Then we must prepare. All of us. Sylphania, Zyvarra... every kingdom that shelters behind that divine wind. We must ready ourselves for a war the likes of which hasn't been seen in ten thousand years."

Scarlett met his gaze, her crimson eyes burning with a fierce light. "We will be ready."

With the grim business concluded, the team asked for formal permission to depart. Princess Lyssara and Prince Orvyn immediately protested.

"Stay a few more days!" Lyssara pleaded. "We barely had a chance to celebrate!"
"Yes!"Orvyn added. "Please!"

But the King raised a hand. "Their path is clear now. They have a new member to settle and a guild to prepare. The Untamed Guild has its own storms to weather." He gave Scarlett a respectful nod. "You have our thanks, and our blessing. Zyvarra's gates are always open to you."

The farewells at the castle gates were a mixture of warmth and sorrow. The Queen embraced Scarlett, a gesture that surprised the Guild Master into uncharacteristic stillness. Princess Lyssara hugged a very confused Shojin and a stiff Kokan. Prince Orvyn shook their hands firmly, his eyes saying more than his words.

They had just passed through the city's main gates and were starting down the road towards the Sylphania border when the sound of pounding footsteps made them turn.

Tharvok and his entire squad—Bram, Ignis, Veyra, Korvath, and Feylin—had run after them, their armor glinting in the morning sun.

Tharvok skidded to a halt in front of Scarlett, slightly breathless. "I... we couldn't let you leave without a proper goodbye," he said, his voice a low rumble.

He looked at her, his usual commanding presence softened. "Stay," he asked, the single word laden with a meaning that went far beyond protocol. "Just a few days more."

Scarlett looked up at him, and for a moment, the grumpy mask slipped. There was a flicker of something warm and regretful in her eyes. "You know I can't," she said, her voice quieter than usual.

Tharvok nodded, the hope in his eyes dimming but not dying. "I know." He then bowed deeply, as did his entire squad. "Thank you. For everything. For the Prince. For... for being you."

What followed was a chaotic, heartfelt flurry of farewells. Shojin got bear-hugged by a surprisingly emotional Korvath. Kokan received a formal, respectful nod from Veyra and a flicker of approval from Ignis. Bram even managed a gruff, "Try not to cause an international incident... for at least a week."

Then Tharvok turned back to Scarlett. The world seemed to shrink to just the two of them. He didn't hug her. He simply reached out and took her hand, his large, calloused fingers enveloping hers. He brought it to his lips and pressed a firm, lingering kiss to her knuckles, his amber eyes locked with her crimson ones.

"Until we meet again, Guild Master," he whispered, his voice for her alone.

Scarlett felt a jolt, a strange and unfamiliar warmth spreading from her hand throughout her entire body. She didn't pull away. She just gave a slow, single nod.

Then, they turned and walked away, the four of them—the veteran, the firebrand, the prodigy, and the broken heir—heading home. As they crossed the border and began to vanish from view, Tharvok stood watching, a solitary figure on the road.

He whispered words that only the wind could hear. "Take care of yourself, Scarlett of Sylax."

The moment the Sylax team was out of sight, the tension broke behind him.

Feylin zipped around his head, giggling. "Ooooh! The General is already missing her!"
Veyra smirked,her serpentine tail twitching. "His eyes were practically hearts. It was disgusting. And adorable."
Korvath grunted,elbowing a sullen Bram. "See? I told you. Smitten, he is."
Bram rolled his eyes,but even he couldn't suppress a grudging smile. "I still say it's a terrible idea. But... I've seen worse."
Ignis,his fiery form flickering with amusement, summed it up for all of them. "The question, General, is not if, but when. Why don't you just court her properly?"

Tharvok, his cheeks tinged with a faint emerald blush beneath his tusks, finally turned away from the empty road. He shot his squad a look that was half-annoyance, half-amusement, but his eyes kept drifting back to the horizon where a flash of a crimson cloak had disappeared.

Back on the road to Sylphania, Scarlett walked in uncharacteristic silence, her hand occasionally curling into a fist as if she could still feel the press of his lips against her skin. The world was getting darker, and war was on the horizon, but for a brief, fleeting moment, the memory of a gentle kiss on her knuckles was a small, stubborn flame in the growing storm.

Chapter 34: The Long Road to Sylphania

The road back to Sylphania was a four-day canvas upon which the newest, most fragile member of their party began to slowly, painfully, stitch herself back together. The moment they stepped from the ordered beauty of Zyvarra back into the untamed embrace of the Lunara Wilds, the dynamic shifted.

Shojin, freed from royal protocol, immediately reverted to his natural state: a walking, talking explosion of energy.
"WE'RE BACK IN THE SPOOKY FOREST!"he yelled, his voice echoing through the ancient trees. "Alright, team! Eyes peeled for walking meatballs, illusionary bacon, and giant stabby holes!"
He'd dart ahead,then run back, his enthusiasm a stark contrast to the heavy silence that clung to Kurohana like a shroud. "Hey, Kuro! You ever seen a tree that looks like a grumpy old man? Look! That one! It's got a nose and everything!"

Kurohana, walking in the middle of the group, would flinch at the sudden noise. Her eyes, still hollow, would dart towards every shadow. A snapped twig was an assassin. A bird's call was a warning shriek. Her breath would hitch, her hands would tremble, and a silent panic would grip her.

Each time, Kokan was there. He never crowded her, never forced conversation. He simply adjusted his pace to walk beside her, a calm, blue-haired sentinel. When her breathing grew ragged, he would summon a tiny, cool mist that settled around her like a calming blanket. When she stumbled over a root, his hand was there, steadying her elbow without a word. His presence was a silent promise: You are not alone.

Scarlett led from the front, her grumpy master persona firmly back in place, a comfortable armor against the world.
"Fire-brat,if you don't stop yelling, you're going to attract every predator between here and the capital. And I'm not saving you this time."
"Coldy,stop coddling her. She needs to learn to watch her own feet. The forest isn't going to hold her hand."
But her critiques lacked their usual bite.Her crimson eyes missed nothing, constantly scanning not just for physical threats, but for the tremors in her newest apprentice.

The first test came on the afternoon of the first day. A pack of Shadow Stalkers, drawn by Shojin's noise and the scent of fresh grief, emerged from the undergrowth. They were sleek, panther-like creatures with fur that drank the light and claws that could shred steel.

Before Scarlett could even move, Shojin let out a whoop. "MY TURN! RISING PHOENIX BLAZE!" He shot upwards in a controlled burst of flame, not to attack, but to distract, drawing the creatures' eyes skyward.

In that moment of distraction, Kokan moved. "Moonlit Tide Cutter." His voice was calm. A whip of pressurized water snapped out, not to kill, but to entangle, wrapping around the lead Stalker's legs and sending it tumbling.

Kurohana froze, her father's death flashing behind her eyes—the violence, the betrayal.

"Enji," Scarlett's voice cut through her panic, using her given name for the first time. It wasn't gentle. It was a command. "They're just animals. Hungry ones. Your team is handling it. Watch. Learn."

She watched as Shojin and Kokan moved in a chaotic, perfect tandem. Fire and water. Noise and silence. They weren't just fighting; they were dancing. They protected each other's blind spots, used each other's attacks as setups. Within a minute, the Stalkers were routed, fleeing back into the shadows.

Shojin landed, panting but grinning. "See, Kuro? Nothing to it! We're the best team!"
Kokan nodded to her,a flicker of pride in his eyes. "They work on instinct. We work together."

A tiny, almost imperceptible spark lit in the darkness of Kurohana's gaze.

That night, around a campfire, the bond deepened. Shojin, in a disastrous attempt to cook, produced something that was charred on the outside and frozen on the inside. Kokan took over with quiet efficiency, producing a simple, perfectly edible stew.

Shojin, undeterred, launched into a dramatic, highly exaggerated retelling of his first mission and the "Giant Doggy of Doom."
"...and then Master,with just a finger, BOOM! The thing just folded up like a sad little origami project! It was the coolest thing I've ever seen!"
For the first time,a ghost of a smile touched Kurohana's lips.

Encouraged, Kokan spoke softly about his life in the cold, silent mansion, his little sister, and the weight of a legacy he never wanted. He didn't look at her as he spoke, but his words were a bridge. I understand loneliness. I understand weight.

Kurohana didn't speak of her past. But she listened. And she didn't flinch when a log cracked in the fire.

The second day, they reached the heart of Lunara, the fog basin. This time, when the whispering mists tried to show Kurohana visions of her father, of Jakan's anguished face, she didn't freeze. She clenched her fists, took a deep breath, and focused on Shojin's inane chatter about cloud shapes and Kokan's steady presence at her side. She walked through her grief instead of letting it swallow her.

On the third day, as they navigated a treacherous ravine, a massive Rock Troll blocked their path. Shojin launched a fireball that just annoyed it. Kokan's water blades skidded off its stony hide.

Scarlett watched, arms crossed. "It's a rock, you idiots! You don't blast a rock! You find the crack! Work together!"

Frustrated, Shojin yelled, "I'll make a crack! BRO! NOW!"
He unleashed a concentrated jet of fire,not at the troll's body, but at a single, large boulder near its feet. The stone superheated and exploded.

In that split second, Kokan understood. As shrapnel flew and the troll stumbled, he summoned every drop of moisture in the air and focused it into a single, ultra-precise Tide Cutter, aiming not for the troll, but for the narrow, weakened joint in its ankle.

The water blade, sharper than any steel, sliced clean through. The troll roared in pain and surprise as its foot was severed from its leg. It crashed to the ground, defeated.

Shojin and Kokan stood panting, looking at each other with wide eyes. They'd done it. Without a word from Scarlett.

Kurohana, watching from behind, felt that spark within her grow a little brighter. This was what it meant to be untamed. It wasn't just chaos. It was trust. It was family.

On the fourth and final day, the trees began to thin. The air lost its ancient, magical weight and took on the familiar, clean scent of Sylphania. They walked in a comfortable silence, the four of them—the master and her three wildly different apprentices.

As the shimmering, majestic veil of the Sylphania barrier came into view, they all stopped.

Shojin grinned, throwing an arm around a startled Kurohana and a tolerant Kokan. "We're home! Wait till the guild meets you, Kuro! You're gonna love it! It's the best, craziest, most awesome place in the world!"

Kokan gave a small, genuine smile. "It is... unique. You will be safe there."

Kurohana looked at the glowing barrier, the embodiment of the power that had kept her kind at bay for millennia. Now, it was her sanctuary. She looked at Shojin's infectious grin, at Kokan's steady calm, and at Scarlett, who was watching her with an expression that was neither pity nor pressure, but simple expectation.

She didn't smile. But the crushing weight on her chest felt a little lighter. The broken flame she carried hadn't gone out. It had found kindling.

Scarlett put her hands on her hips, a lazy smirk finally returning to her face. "Alright, headaches. Stop gawking. Let's go home. I need a beer that hasn't been carried by a complaining dragonnoid."

Together, the four of them—the grumpy legend, the fiery sun, the calm ocean, and the daughter of fallen flames—stepped forward, crossing the threshold into Sylphania. The long road was over. A new adventure was just beginning.

Chapter 35: Heir of the Flame

The shimmering veil of the Sylphania barrier stood before them, a majestic, pulsating wall of light and wind. To Kurohana Enji, it felt less like a gateway and more like a wall of pure, divine judgment. She hesitated, her heart hammering against her ribs. The inherent, ancient magic of the barrier was anathema to her very blood.

Scarlett didn't say a word. She simply held out her hand, and that familiar, impossible breeze—the divine wind—coalesced around her fingers. It wove itself into a simple, elegant silver necklace with a teardrop pendant. In a swift, painless motion, she pricked Enji’s finger with a kunai tip, letting a single drop of her dark, demonic blood fall onto the pendant. The silver absorbed it, a faint, smoky swirl appearing within.

"Put this on," Scarlett commanded. "And hide your horns. No wings, either. Not a flicker."

With a concentrated effort, Enji's horns and the faint outline of concealed wings shimmered and vanished. She clasped the necklace, feeling a strange, cool sensation wash over her, as if a gentle, powerful wind was cocooning her, masking the infernal energy that simmered in her soul.

No one questioned it. Shojin was too busy being excited. Only Kokan watched with quiet, knowing eyes. He saw the divine wind, he saw the blood, and he understood the monumental secret his master was weaving. He gave a barely perceptible nod to Scarlett, a silent vow of secrecy.

Together, they stepped through the barrier. Enji flinched, expecting searing pain, but felt only a gentle resistance, like pushing through a curtain of heavy silk. They were in.

The journey to the guild hall was a blur of familiar sights for the trio and overwhelming newness for Enji. And then, there it was. The Sylax guild hall. It looked less like a building and more like a structure that had survived a perpetual, joyful explosion.

Scarlett pushed the door open.

BOOM.

A flying mug of beer, launched from some unseen arm-wrestling match, shot directly towards the newcomers' faces.

Scarlett, Kokan, and Shojin moved as one. Scarlett leaned left, Kokan ducked right, and Shojin did a comical, twisting backflip, snatching the mug out of the air mid-spin and taking a triumphant gulp.

Kurohana Enji, heir to the Fire Realm of the Demon Lords, stood frozen. The mug hit her square in the chest, drenching her in cheap, frothy ale.

A burly dwarf with a braided beard that had bits of food in it rushed over, his face a mask of apology. "Oi! Sorry there, lass! Wild swing! Here, let me get ya a towel—" He stopped, squinting at her. "Hey, Master! Who's the new face?"

Before Enji could process the beer soaking into her clothes, Scarlett had hopped onto the nearest table, stomping her boot for attention. The hall's chaos dipped for a grand total of three seconds.

"LISTEN UP, YOU BEAUTIFUL DISASTERS!" she yelled, a dramatic flair in her voice. "This is Kurohana Enji! She's our new member! And my new apprentice! So, welcome her like you welcome everyone else: with questionable life choices, terrible advice, and enough chaos to make a dragon dizzy! NOW, GET BACK TO YOUR DRINKING! THIS IS A WELCOME PARTY!"

The hall erupted in a deafening roar of approval. Enji was immediately swallowed by the wave of untamed humanity and other assorted races. A kitsune with nine flickering tails offered her a suspiciously glowing drink. A massive Oni clapped her on the back so hard she stumbled into a group of laughing shadow elves. Someone shoved a half-eaten turkey leg into her hand.

Akira fought her way through the crowd, ledger in hand. "N-name, age, special skills, known allergies, and... um... preferred method of causing minor property damage? It's for the insurance forms." She then handed Enji a pendant with a scarlet crystal etched with the wild, looping symbol of Sylax.

Enji stared at it, utterly bewildered.

"IT'S YOUR GUILD PENDANT!" Shojin yelled over the noise, slinging a soppy, beer-soaked arm around her. "IT MEANS YOU'RE FAMILY! AND YOU GET TO EAT FOR FREE IN THE MESS! WELL, SORT OF FREE! YOU JUST HAVE TO FIGHT HAYATE FOR THE LAST PIECE OF PIE SOMETIMES!"

Kokan, standing slightly apart, watched her with a soft understanding. He saw the overwhelmed look in her eyes, the culture shock. He remembered his own first day, the sheer, brutal adjustment from cold, silent order to this beautiful, screaming madness. He gave her a small, reassuring smile.

The night was a whirlwind. Enji was pulled into arm-wrestling matches, taught drinking songs with obscene lyrics, and witnessed a magical duel between two mages that ended with both of them turned into temporary, squawking chickens. Through it all, she kept her secret locked tight behind a hesitant smile, answering questions about her "recent loss" with vague, truthful sorrow. She was a girl who had lost her father, seeking a new home. It wasn't a lie. It was just a fraction of the truth.

Kokan eventually slipped away to the relative quiet of his room, but Shojin stayed by her side, a loyal, chaotic guardian, explaining the intricate social hierarchy of Sylax (which mostly involved who could throw a mug the farthest).

The next morning, the hall was a battlefield of snoring adventurers. Sunlight streamed through the windows, illuminating the aftermath of the party. Out in the training yard, Shojin and Kokan were already sparring, their movements a familiar dance of fire and water.

Scarlett was lounged on a thick tree branch overhead, sipping a tall glass of lemonade, her eyes half-closed as she supervised.

Enji approached, her steps quiet. The three of them stopped and looked at her.

"I... I want to talk to you," she said, her voice firmer than it had been since her father's death.

Kokan immediately stopped his practice, his calm, blue eyes filled with concern. "Is everything alright?" he asked, the memory of her breakdown still fresh in his mind.

Scarlett swung down from the branch, landing silently. "Spill the beans, Enji," she said, taking a long sip of her lemonade.

Enji took a deep breath, the words she had practiced all night finally finding their way out. "Everything is... as ok as it can be." She looked at each of them in turn. "I am the daughter of the previous Demon Lord, Shuen Akumao. My father... he never wanted the war that is coming. I am his heir. I am the princess of the Fire Realm of the Demons."

The training yard was silent. Shojin's eyes were wide as dinner plates.

"Only a few know this," she continued, her voice gaining strength, fueled by a rising tide of grief and determination. "But I want to take revenge for my father. And I want to conquer the realm he once ruled. I want to claim my birthright." She turned her burning, blood-red eyes to Scarlett. "Lady Scarlett, you are the strongest person I know. Please, teach me. Train me. And..." she looked at the boys, "...I want Shojin and Kokan with me. If we can conquer the Fire Realm, I can unite it. And when the barrier finally breaks, I will stand beside Sylphania. Not against it."

Kokan listened, analyzing the strategic implications, the risks, the sheer, audacious scale of her goal. He saw the fire in her eyes, the same fire of purpose that had been lit in him. He gave a single, firm nod. "A united front from within the demon ranks would be a tactical advantage of incalculable value."

Shojin didn't need strategy. He let out a whoop that startled birds from the trees. "KURO! That's the most awesome, most untamed thing I've ever heard! You're part of our team! Of course we're with you! We'll help you kick so much demon butt! It'll be the greatest adventure EVER!"

Scarlett looked at her three apprentices: the fiery heir seeking vengeance, the calm strategist seeing a path to victory, and the chaotic ball of energy ready to charge into hell itself for a friend. A slow, proud, and slightly terrifying smile spread across her face.

She finished her lemonade and tossed the glass over her shoulder, where it shattered dramatically against a tree.

"Alright then," Scarlett said, her voice dripping with lazy, confident power. "Lesson one starts tomorrow. How to overthrow a demonic regime before breakfast. Try not to die."

The team was complete. The oath was sworn. In the heart of the untamed guild, the heir of the fallen flames had found her kindling, and now, she was ready to burn.

Chapter 36: Lessons in Fire and Friendship

Life in Sylax settled into a new, chaotic normal, a symphony of clashing steel, exploding magic, and raucous laughter with Kurohana Enji as its newest, most fascinating instrument. Her integration was not seamless—it was a glorious, messy, and often hilarious collision of worlds.

Kurohana’s first week was a study in culture shock. Waking up to the sound of someone testing a new explosive rune instead of birds, having to physically fight for the last piece of toast at breakfast, and learning that "borrowing" usually meant "permanently acquiring with a cheeky grin" were all monumental shifts.

Her first solo trip to the guild's mess hall ended with her standing frozen, tray in hand, as a full-scale food fight erupted over whether gravy belonged on pudding. A buttered roll had smacked her square in the forehead before Kokan, with a long-suffering sigh, had gently guided her to a safer table, using a precise ice shield to deflect a flying sausage.

Shojin, of course, saw this as the ultimate welcome. "See, Kuro? That's how we say 'good morning' here!" he'd yelled, before launching himself into the fray with a battle cry.

Scarlett’s commentary was, as always, unhelpful. "Stop looking so constipated, fire-princess. It's just a bit of flying condiments. Try throwing something back. I recommend the jellied eels. They have a great splat factor."

Training began at dawn. Scarlett’s methods were… unique.

For Kurohana, it wasn't about summoning more hellfire. It was about control.
"Your father's flame was a wildfire—powerful,but it burned everything, including himself," Scarlett stated, dodging a wild jet of black and crimson fire. "I need you to be a forge. Contained. Focused. You want to be a ruler? Then stop setting the training dummies on fire and start sculpting the metal."
Kurohana,sweating and frustrated, learned to compress her innate demonic fire into a blade, a shield, a delicate, dancing flame in her palm that could mend as easily as it could destroy.

For Kokan, the lesson was the opposite. "Stop thinking, ice-prince! Feel!" Scarlett barked as he perfectly, mathematically deflected a series of attacks. "Your water is a reflection of your soul. Right now, it's a frozen pond. I need it to be a crashing wave! Let go!"
It was during a spar with Shojin that it happened.Frustrated with Shojin's unpredictable, looping attacks, Kokan stopped calculating. He simply reacted. A wave of water, wild and powerful, erupted from him, not in a clean blade, but in a surging tide that lifted Shojin off his feet and deposited him, sputtering and laughing, into the horse trough.

For Shojin, the lesson was… not dying. "Your Phoenix Blaze isn't a party trick, it's a finishing move!" Scarlett yelled as he tried to use it to toast a marshmallow. "And stop announcing your attacks! The enemy isn't going to wait for you to finish yelling 'FIRE FIST OF ULTIMATE DESTINY'! They're going to stab you in the spleen!"

Their first official quest together was a D-rank: "Retrieve the Mayor's Magically Enlarged, Sentient Turnip." It should have been simple.

It was not.

The turnip, named Terry, was surprisingly agile and had a mean right hook. The quest devolved into a chaotic chase through the town square, with Shojin trying to reason with it ("Come on, Terry! We'll take you to a nice, big salad!"), Kokan attempting to create ice-slip patches to slow it down, and Kurohana, in a moment of inspired chaos, using a tiny, precise jet of flame to singe its leafy top, making it stop in shocked outrage long enough for Kokan to encase its roots in ice.

They returned to the guild, covered in mud and trailing a very grumpy, frostbitten giant turnip, to a standing ovation.

The moments between adventures were where the real magic happened.

They'd sit on the roof at night, Shojin pointing out constellations he'd named himself ("That's the Drunken Dwarf! And that's the Flying Sausage!"), while Kokan quietly corrected him with the actual astronomical names. Kurohana, for the first time, would laugh—a real, genuine sound that surprised even her.

She began to teach them small, harmless demonic charms—a flick of the wrist to light a campfire, a whispered phrase to make shadows dance. In return, Shojin taught her the Sylax handshake (which involved a complex series of slaps, a spin, and ended with both parties pretending to faint), and Kokan showed her how to find the quiet, hidden corners of the guild where you could actually hear yourself think.

Amidst the training and chaos, a subplot of dramatic romance unfolded at the reception desk.

Isamu, leaning against it with practiced casualness, would sigh. "Akira, my love, the light of your furious stamping is the only thing that guides me through the darkness of my paperwork."

Akira, not looking up from a form, would retort, "Your paperwork is late. Again. And if you call me 'your love' one more time, I'm stamping 'REJECTED' on your face."
"But you'd look at my face while doing it,"he'd purr. "That's a start."
Scarlett,passing by, would throw a muffin at his head. "Stop harassing my receptionist, you walking liability. Akira, if he bothers you, just set his quest reports on fire. I'll allow it."

Weeks turned into a month. The changes were subtle but profound.

Kurohana's panic attacks became less frequent, replaced by a determined fire in her eyes. She still mourned, but she no longer drowned in it. She was learning to burn with it.

Kokan’s water magic lost some of its rigid perfection, gaining a fluid, adaptive quality. He was learning to lead, his calmness a perfect counterbalance to Shojin's frenzy and Kurohana's intensity.

Shojin, while still a walking catastrophe, was a catastrophe with direction. His fire was hotter, his control finer, and his loyalty to his new team was as fierce and unshakeable as his flames.

One evening, after a particularly grueling day of training that ended with all three of them collapsed in a heap of exhaustion and laughter, they lay on the grass, looking up at the stars.

"You know," Kurohana said softly, "my father dreamed of a world where our fire could be used to build, not just destroy." She looked at her hands, where a small, controlled flame danced obediently. "I think... he would have liked it here."

Shojin grinned, slinging a sooty arm around her. "That's the spirit, Kuro! We're gonna build you a whole new kingdom! A super cool, fiery one with, like, lava moats and everything!"

Kokan, lying on her other side, gave one of his rare, full smiles. "The logistical challenges of a lava moat are significant... but the psychological impact on invaders would be undeniable."

From her perch on the roof, a tankard of beer in hand, Scarlett watched them. The grumpy, lazy mask was gone, replaced by an expression of deep, quiet satisfaction. Her headaches had paid off. The broken flame was not just mending; it was growing stronger, surrounded by water and wildfire, forging a new kind of power in the heart of the untamed guild. The future was a storm on the horizon, but for the first time, she was sure her wild, chaotic, magnificent apprentices would be ready to meet it. Together.

Chapter 37: Return of the Celestia Pact

The morning chaos of Sylax was in its usual, glorious full swing. At a central table, Kokan, Kurohana, and Shojin were navigating a breakfast that involved dodging flying cutlery and deciphering what might be eggs beneath a layer of mysterious, glowing sauce. Yudai of the Crimson Fangs sat with them, eating with a stoic calm that seemed to generate a personal bubble of silence amidst the storm.

Suddenly, the main doors burst open. A young adventurer, panting and wild-eyed, stood framed in the doorway.

"THEY'RE BACK!" he yelled, his voice cutting through the din. "THE PACT IS BACK! THE CELESTIA PACT IS BACK!!!"

The effect was instantaneous. The chaos didn't stop; it transformed. A wave of pure, electrifying enthusiasm swept the hall. Mugs were slammed on tables, cheers erupted, and a chant began: "CEL-ES-TIA! CEL-ES-TIA!"

Shojin, Kokan, and Kurohana stared, utterly bewildered.

"Who's back? Who are they?" Shojin yelled over the noise, his head swiveling.

Kurohana murmured, "Wow... what's happening?"

Kokan, ever analytical, turned to the one person who seemed utterly unaffected. Yudai was calmly finishing a piece of chicken, his expression unreadable.

"Sir Yudai," Kokan asked. "What is happening?"

Yudai took his time, chewing slowly, swallowing, and then fixing them with a long, assessing glare. He sighed, as if burdened by the sheer weight of their curiosity.

"Ok, ok. It's not a big deal," he grumbled.

Shojin practically vibrated. "Not a big deal?! Then why is everyone acting like the king just declared a free beer day?!"

Yudai's gaze drifted towards the door, a flicker of something—respect? nostalgia?—in his eyes. "They are the Celestia Pact. One of the strongest parties in Sylax."

"I've never seen or heard of them," Kokan stated.

"Because," Yudai explained, taking a sip of his drink, "three years ago, they took on a Decade Quest. A mission meant to last ten years. And it's been three years since anyone here laid eyes on them."

As he spoke, Shojin had already joined the cheering throng, yelling "WELCOME BACK!" with no idea who he was welcoming. Kurohana and Kokan remained focused on Yudai, their curiosity piqued.

Then, the doors creaked open again.

The crowd parted like a sea. The first to enter was a figure of immense, calm authority. He was a humanoid with wise eyes and long silver hair, but from his head sprouted elegant white wolf ears, and a bushy white tail swayed behind him. He leaned on a crescent staff, his dark robes adorned with shimmering star motifs. He carried an aura of ancient wisdom and unshakable strength.

Following him was a mountain of a man in silver armor etched with glowing moonlight runes. His gaze was stoic, his shoulders broad enough to carry the weight of the world.

Next, a woman bounded in, a silver-blue bow slung over her shoulder. Her light brown hair was in a perky ponytail, and her star-patterned outfit seemed to sparkle with her energy. She waved at the crowd with a brilliant, charming smile.

A serene woman with long lavender hair and flowing robes entered next, crescent moon earrings glinting. Her eyes held a far-seeing quality, as if she were observing a reality just beyond everyone else's sight.

A man with short silver hair and a playful glint in his blue eyes followed, his light cape flowing around him. He winked at a blushing guild member.

Then came a healer with pale blue hair and a gentle, kind face, her robes embroidered with moons and flowers. She looked slightly overwhelmed but happy.

And finally, the last member entered. A young woman, seemingly the youngest, with long, flowing silver-blue hair adorned with a crescent moon hairpin. Her eyes were a soft, glowing violet, and she carried an air of shy adorableness that instantly made her the center of the Pact's protective attention.

The guild hall erupted. Everyone swarmed them, offering mugs, clapping them on the back, shouting questions about their quest.

From the upstairs balcony, a very grumpy, sleep-deprived Scarlett emerged, rubbing her eyes. "OI! IDIOTS! What's all the racket?!" Her bleary gaze found the Celestia Pact. A slow, sarcastic smirk spread across her face. "Oh. You lot finally decided to crawl back. Took you long enough. Welcome back."

The Pact smiled, used to her particular brand of welcome.

Their collective gaze then shifted across the hall, landing on the table where Yudai, Kokan, and Kurohana sat. Yudai gave them a slow, sarcastic two-fingered salute.

The wolf-eared leader, Kael Hoshigami, his wise eyes curious, noted the two unfamiliar teens. "And who might these be?" he asked, his voice a calm, deep rumble.

Scarlett hopped down from the balcony, landing lightly and dragging a cheering Shojin over by his collar. "These are my headaches," she announced dramatically. "The noisy one is Shojin Takeru. The broody one is Kokan Tohei. And the one who looks like she's constantly questioning her life choices is Kurohana Enji. My apprentices."

She then gestured lazily at the Pact. "Headaches, this is the Celestia Pact. Try not to be too impressed."

Kael introduced them all with a warm, paternal air, each member nodding or offering a small smile as their name and role were called:

· Kael Hoshigami: The leader, their wise teacher and strategist.
· Akira Kagami: The stoic tank.
· Sora Hoshihana: The cheerful magical archer.
· Liora Tsukihana: The serene mystic and oracle.
· Hiro Amane: The playful wind elementalist.
· Yuki Minazuki: The gentle healer.
· Mio Amatsuki: The youngest, a shy but powerful sword-magic hybrid.

Kael chuckled, a twinkle in his eye. "Nice to meet you all. I never thought our Guild Master would have the patience for apprentices," he said in a teasing tone.

Just then, the guild's chef, a burly man named James, burst out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. "KAEL! You old wolf!" he boomed, pulling the leader into a brief, back-slapping hug. He then proceeded to place a veritable feast before the Celestia Pact—roasted meats, fresh bread, fruits that shimmered with dew.

A wave of mock outrage swept through the other guild members.
"HEY!Why do they get the good stuff?"
"James,I asked for an extra sausage for three weeks!"
"This is favoritism!"

On the other side of the hall, Isamu was leaning against the reception desk, giving Akira his most charming smile. "See, my love? Even the legendary Celestia Pact recognizes the sublime beauty of a well-stamped form."

Sora, the archer, nudged Hiro. "Look, Isamu hasn't changed a bit. Still a hopeless flirt."

Scarlett slumped into a chair at her usual table and yelled, "Oi, James! One salmon plate! And make it snappy, I'm starving!"

James grumbled good-naturedly. "Ohh, alright, Manager... Your highness..." The complaints, the cheers, the sheer chaotic joy of a reunited family filled the hall to the rafters.

Far away, in a dark, rain-slicked alley of a nameless Sylphanian city, the scene shifted. A handsome, mysterious man stood under the eaves of a crumbling building, his face hidden in shadow. The only light glinted off a small, meticulously drawn picture he held in his gloved hand.

It was a portrait of Kurohana Enji.

His voice, when he spoke, was a cold, dark whisper that promised nothing but trouble, cutting through the silence of the night.

"Kurohana Enji... daughter of Lord Shuen..."

The picture crumpled slightly in his grip. The chapter ended, the joyful chaos of Sylax a world away, leaving only the chilling echo of his words and the promise of a looming shadow.

Chapter 38: Whispers Before Dawn

The door to Scarlett's office closed, muting the perpetual, joyful roar of the guild hall to a distant, comforting rumble. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of old parchment and the weight of unfinished stories. The Celestia Pact stood assembled before her desk, not as returning heroes, but as weary scouts delivering a grim report.

Kael Hoshigami leaned on his crescent staff, his wise, wolf-eared gaze fixed on Scarlett, who was slumped in her chair, boots propped on the desk, idly spinning a dagger on its point.

"The Decade Quest took us further than any map records, Master," Kael began, his voice a calm, deep river flowing through the quiet room. "To the very edge of the known world. The otherwise border of Sylphania."

Scarlett's dagger didn't stop spinning. "And? Find anything interesting? A new type of sand? A particularly grumpy sea monster?"

"We found the barrier," Sora, the archer, chimed in, her usual cheerfulness subdued. "Or rather, we felt it. It's… thin there, Master. Like worn cloth. You can feel the cold from the other side."

Scarlett's lazy spinning slowed. Her crimson eyes flicked from the dagger to Kael's face. "It's old. It's supposed to be thin. That's not news."

"It's not thinning naturally, Master Scarlett," Kael said, his tone leaving no room for doubt.

The dagger clattered to a halt. Scarlett's boots hit the floor with a soft thud. The last vestiges of laziness evaporated from her posture, replaced by a predator's alertness. "What do you mean?"

Kael's gaze was unwavering. "I think you know."

A heavy silence fell. Liora, the oracle, nodded slowly, her lavender hair swaying as if in a breeze only she could feel. Akira, the stoic tank, crossed his massive arms, his expression grim. The younger members of the Pact—Hiro, Yuki, and Mio—exchanged confused glances, not yet fully understanding the implications.

Scarlett stood up slowly, her chair groaning in protest. She walked to the window, staring out at the darkening sky. "Oh, no," she whispered, the words heavy with a dread she hadn't felt in millennia. "There's going to be a big war."

Murmurs broke out among the Pact.
"A war?With who?" Hiro asked, his playful glint gone.
"The barrier is the divine wind,"Yuki, the healer, said, her gentle voice laced with confusion.

“How can it be weakened by anything but time?”
Akira grunted.“It means something is attacking it. Something powerful.”
Liora closed her eyes,her voice ethereal. “Something… that should not exist in this world.”

Sora’s eyes widened. “You don’t mean… someone stronger than a god?”

Kael and Scarlett, their backs to the room, nodded in grim unison.

The whispers in the room died. The truth was a physical blow. Someone was actively trying to tear down the divine shield that had protected them for ten thousand years. The concept was so blasphemous, so terrifying, it stole the air from the room.

Kael turned to face his team, his expression that of a general. “It is as the Master says. We must prepare. They are coming.”

Night had fully claimed the sky, but Sylax was far from silent. Laughter, the clatter of mugs, and the occasional crash or burst of magic from the main hall were a symphony of defiance against the growing dark. Scarlett stood on her balcony, the noise a familiar comfort that couldn’t quite touch the cold knot in her chest. She stared at the moon, a perfect, cold pearl in the velvet black.

“I don’t think someone that strong exists, Sis,” she whispered to the night, her voice barely audible. “Sylph… your barrier… the divine wind is fading. Not from age. From a will. What are we facing?”

Far below, in the secluded training yard, the only light came from the moon and the faint, flickering embers of demonic fire that danced around Kurohana Enji’s fists. She moved through a kata, her face a mask of fierce concentration, each strike fueled by grief and a desperate need for strength. The shadows were deep, the silence a stark contrast to the guild’s chaos.

Kokan, on his way back from the library, paused at the edge of the yard. He watched her for a moment, a silent ghost in the moonlight. He moved without a sound, appearing behind her just as she finished a spinning kick.

“You are still training,” he stated, his voice calm.

“AH—!” Kurohana’s scream was cut short as Kokan’s hand gently but firmly covered her mouth from behind.

“Shh. It’s me, Kokan,” he said softly, his breath a whisper near her ear. “If you scream, everyone will know your little secret.” He slowly removed his hand.

Kurohana spun around, her heart hammering, a faint flush of embarrassment on her cheeks. “I am not scared of ghosts!” she huffed, crossing her arms.

Kokan's lips quirked into the barest hint of a smile, his eyes glinting with uncharacteristic playfulness in the moonlight. "Oh, really?" he added, a teasing note in his voice. "Then why the scream, oh Heir of the Fire Demon Lord?"

She pouted, looking away. "I am not! I just… don't like them. They're creepy."

Kokan took a step closer, his head tilted in mock observation. "They are creepy. Really." His tone was flat, but his eyes were smiling.

"Yeah!" she replied, her pout deepening, making her look younger than her years.

A low, genuine chuckle escaped Kokan's lips—a rare, warm sound that surprised even him. Kurohana's eyes widened at the sound.

He quickly composed himself, looking up at the moon she had been ignoring. "So, you are training here all alone at this late hour."

Kurohana followed his gaze, the moon's glow softening her features. "Yeah. I have to get strong."

"So you truly wish to conquer the Fire Demon Realm?" he asked, his voice now serious.

"Yes," she said, her own voice firming with resolve. "I want to avenge my father. And I must take the throne he led. It is my responsibility." Her fists clenched at her sides. "It's my destiny."

Kokan's gaze remained on the moon, but his whisper was so low it was barely a breath, a thought given voice meant for no one but the night. "It's not your responsibility… You're pushing yourself too hard."

"What did you say?" Kurohana asked, turning to him.

Kokan met her gaze, his stormy grey eyes clear in the moonlight. "I asked if I may join you in this training session. Your secret is safe. And," he added, a new determination in his voice, "I also need to get stronger. To walk beside Sensei, and you, and that loud idiot Shojin, without being a burden."

Kurohana's pout finally melted into a small, genuine smile. Her blood-red eyes, usually so full of pain, softened. "Thank you. Thank you, all of you. And of course, you can." In the quiet intimacy of the moonlit yard, their shared look lasted a heartbeat longer than necessary, a silent pact forged in shadow and resolve.

High above on the guild hall's main roof, Mio Amatsuki of the Celestia Pact had found a rare pocket of relative quiet. She sat with her knees drawn to her chest, listening to the muffled chaos below—a familiar, comforting lullaby after three years in the silent wilds. She stared at the same moon, its light catching the silver in her hair.

SMASH!

The roof access door flew open and slammed against the wall. A panting, disheveled Shojin stumbled out, his eyes wide with manufactured terror. He scanned the rooftop and his gaze landed on Mio. She flinched and pulled her knees tighter, her peaceful solitude shattered.

“Hey! You there!” Shojin yelled, pointing a dramatic finger. “Don’t just sit alone like some tragic moon statue! Talk to me!”

Mio said nothing. She simply raised one delicate eyebrow, a barely-there smile playing on her lips. She was amused, but her cool, reserved demeanor was a fortress.

Shojin, completely misreading her silence, marched over. “What are you doing up here, anyway? Hiding? Me too! Old Thrain’s after me ‘cause I ‘accidentally’ used his precious anvil for fire-fist target practice! Turned it into a modern art piece!” He plopped down beside her with a complete lack of grace, crossing his legs and staring at the moon as if it had personally offended him.

He then turned to her, his head tilted in genuine, oblivious curiosity. “Are you… sane?”

Mio let out a soft, breathy laugh. “Sane?” she repeated, her voice like the chime of a small bell. “In this guild? Not a chance.” A slight, real smile finally broke through. “But I like the chaos.”

“Great!” Shojin beamed, as if she’d just recited a sacred oath. “You’ll see! My genius is misunderstood! My party is a mess, the granny is grumpy, but she’s, like, a super-granny! She can blow up monsters with her pinky!”

Mio laughed again, a little louder this time, and shook her head. “Yes, you are right. But don’t call her ‘granny’ where she can hear you.”

“Good! Then we’re friends!” Shojin declared, as if it were the most logical conclusion in the world. “My name’s Shojin, by the way. You… you look like you could use someone to laugh at your problems with. Or complain with. Or both. You in?”

Mio looked at this chaotic, sun-haired boy who had invaded her peace with the subtlety of a volcanic eruption. A quiet, genuine warmth spread through her. She gave a small, shy nod. “…I suppose I can tolerate you.”

“WOOOHOO!” Shojin yelled, and in a burst of unrestrained enthusiasm, he grabbed her hand to seal their new friendship with a vigorous, Sylax-approved handshake.

The moment his calloused, warm hand enveloped her smaller, cooler one, something electric jolted up Mio’s arm. Her heart hammered against her ribs in a frantic, unfamiliar rhythm. A brilliant, hot blush exploded across her cheeks, painting her face a shade of red visible even in the moonlight. Her eyes widened, her mind went dizzyingly blank.

Thump.
Thump-thump.
What is this feeling?

The world tilted.

Acting on an instinct she didn't understand, her body moved before her brain could catch up. Her other hand, fueled by a surge of panicked energy, shot out and connected with Shojin's chest with surprising force.

"OOF!" Shojin's eyes bulged as he was launched backward, skidding across the rough rooftop tiles until he bumped against the far parapet.

Mio stared, her hand flying to her mouth. Her vision swam, the world fading at the edges. The last thing she saw was Shojin's utterly bewildered, dense expression—completely unaware of the emotional bomb he had just detonated—before a wave of dizziness overwhelmed her. Her eyes rolled back, and she slumped sideways, unconscious.

Shojin sat up, rubbing his sore chest. He looked at the unconscious form of the cute, silver-haired girl he had just made friends with.
"What…what just happened?" he mumbled to the moon, which offered no answers. "Did I… say something wrong?"

Far from the chaos of Sylax, in a rain-slicked alley of a nameless Sylphanian border town, a different kind of storm was brewing. The handsome, mysterious man from the shadows stood over a battered and bleeding informant, his fine clothes untouched by the grime around them. The rain plastered his dark hair to his brow, but his expression was one of cold, detached impatience.

He held up the meticulously drawn picture of Kurohana Enji. "I will ask you one more time," he said, his voice a low, dangerous whisper that cut through the patter of the rain. "Do you know this girl? Where is she?"

The informant coughed, a spray of blood mingling with the rainwater on the cobblestones. "I… I swear… I've never seen her! I don't know! Please!"

The man stared down at him, his face an unreadable mask. He didn't scowl or snarl. He simply… sighed. A soft, disappointed sound that was more terrifying than any shout.

He released his grip, letting the man slump to the ground in a heap of broken promises and fear. The picture of the demon heir, now slightly crumpled and stained with rain, was still held delicately in his gloved hand.

The chapter ends, the joyful chaos of Sylax a world away, the bonds of its members tightening like fists, while in the dark, a single, relentless hunter continued his search, his silence more threatening than any war cry. The dawn was coming, and it promised to be red.

Chapter 39: Shadow Over Sylphania

The Sylax training yard was a controlled vortex of elemental chaos, a perfect mirror of the guild's untamed heart. Shojin was a blur of motion, his "Rising Phoenix Blaze" sending him corkscrewing into the air with a triumphant yell before he landed in a clumsy but enthusiastic roll. Kokan moved with liquid precision, his "Moonlit Tide Cutter" slicing through falling leaves with a whisper-quiet hiss, leaving perfect halves fluttering to the ground. Between them, Kurohana Enji practiced with a fierce, silent focus, compressing her demonic fire into a shimmering, heat-hazed shield that deflected the occasional stray pebble Shojin sent her way.

Perched on a thick branch of the old oak tree overlooking the yard, Scarlett observed it all with a critical, crimson gaze. She took a loud, crunching bite from a bright red apple, her legs swinging lazily in the air.

"Fire-brat, your landing still looks like a dropped sack of potatoes," she called down, her mouth full. "And coldy, stop showing off. Slicing leaves is for barbers, not adventurers. Enji, your shield is leaning. If it were a building, it'd be condemned."

"I'VE GOT IT THIS TIME, GRANNY!" Shojin yelled back, immediately tripping over his own feet and face-planting into the dirt.

Scarlett sighed, a long-suffering sound that was half genuine, half performance. "Hopeless. The lot of you."

On a balcony overlooking the training yard, hidden by a curtain of flowering vines, Mio Amatsuki watched the scene below. Or more specifically, her violet eyes, wide and unblinking, were fixed on one particular fire-brat currently spitting out dirt and laughing. She didn't understand the strange, fluttering feeling in her chest every time he did something recklessly brave or stupidly endearing. She was just… drawn.

"Boo."

"GYAAAH!" Mio screamed, jumping a foot in the air and spinning around, her hand flying to the hilt of her sword.

Leaning against the balcony doorframe was a girl about her age with a sharp, intelligent face and a sleek, dark ponytail that swished as she laughed. This was Hina, a prodigy who'd been solving magical equations and causing sarcastic chaos in Sylax since she was a toddler, and one of Mio's oldest friends.

"By the Founders, Hina! Don't do that!" Mio gasped, her heart hammering.

Hina's laughter was a cool, mocking melody. "Seriously? The great Mio Amatsuki of the Celestia Pact, veteran of a Decade Quest, is screaming and spying on boys from the

shadows? The world truly is ending." She leaned in, her eyes glinting with mischievous insight. "So, which one has captured the unflappable Mio's attention? Let me guess. Is it Kokan Tohei? The broody, powerful heir with the stormy eyes? He's become quite the favorite around here."

Mio's cheeks flushed a delicate pink. "I'm not spying! And it's not Kokan."

Hina's grin widened. "Oho! So it's the other one. Shojin Takeru. The human wildfire. The walking, talking explosion with the emotional depth of a puddle."

"He is not a brat!" Mio retorted a little too quickly, then clamped her mouth shut, realizing her mistake.

Hina's eyebrows shot up. "Oho! Mio Amatsuki is defending Shojin. The plot thickens faster than one of James's mystery stews." She nudged her friend. "Come on, Mio. Spill the beans. What's the deal?"

Mio looked down at the training yard, where Shojin was now trying to teach Kurohana the Sylax handshake and failing spectacularly. "It's… it's not like you're thinking. I just… admire him. He's so strong. And free. He doesn't care what anyone thinks."

"Oho, really!" Hina drawled, her tone dripping with disbelief. "You 'admire' his 'strength'. Is that what we're calling it now? The way you 'admire' his smile? The way you 'admire' his loud, obnoxious, yet somehow infectious energy?"

Mio's blush deepened, spreading to the tips of her ears. She was a beacon of embarrassment.

Hina studied her for a long moment, her sarcastic smirk softening into something more genuine and concerned. "Oh, come on, Mio. Don't tell me you have a crush on the fire-brat. After all this time?" Her voice dropped slightly. "I heard the boy you used to talk about, the one from the lake so long ago… he was a stranger. A memory."

Mio didn't reply. She just stared at Shojin, her expression a tangled web of confusion and yearning. The boy from her memories, the one who had pulled her, a terrified six-year-old, from the icy lake—he'd had the same sun-bright hair, the same warm, fearless smile. It couldn't be… could it? The coincidence was too vast, too impossible. But the feeling, the magnetic pull, was the same.

Hina sighed, reading the conflict on her friend's face. She put a comforting hand on Mio's shoulder. "Just be careful, okay? Crushing on a natural disaster is… unpredictable."

Back in the training yard, Scarlett finished her apple and tossed the core over her shoulder, where it bonked a snoozing Hayate on the helmet. She was about to settle in for a nap when a small, swift bird with feathers the color of twilight zipped down from the sky and landed

gracefully on her knee. It wasn't a normal bird; its eyes held a faint, magical gleam. Tied to its leg was a tiny scroll.

Her apprentices, still engrossed in their training, didn't notice. Scarlett's lazy demeanor didn't change, but her eyes sharpened as she unrolled the message. Her brow furrowed almost imperceptibly. It was a summons, cryptic and urgent, to a location near the border. She didn't show it to the others. This was her burden.

She stretched, let out an exaggerated yawn, and hopped down from the tree. "Alright, that's enough for today," she announced, waving a dismissive hand. "My ears are tired from all your grunting."

"But Granny, I was just getting the hang of the Phoenix Twist!" Shojin protested.

THWACK!

Scarlett's hand connected with the back of his head. "I have a name, you hyperactive gnat. And no, you weren't."

"But, Master," Kurohana started, "we need to train more. I'm not strong enough yet—"

When she looked up, Scarlett was already ten paces away, walking towards the guild gates without a backward glance.

Kokan watched her go, his expression unreadable. "It is what we have come to expect from the Master. Her methods are… indirect."

Kurohana sighed, her shoulders slumping. "But we have to get stronger. We're just wasting time."

"What if we don't?" Kokan suggested, his analytical mind turning to a practical solution. "What about taking a quest? The Crimson Fangs are already on one. Most of the Celestia Pact and other teams have also left. The board will have options for a small team."

Shojin, instantly re-energized, pumped his fist. "WHOHOOO! Yes! Our first real quest as a team! Let's go find something epic! Maybe a dragon! A small one!"

Kurohana shook her head, her demonic pride and personal mission warring with the idea. "No. A quest is a distraction. I need to train. I have a realm to reclaim, not… not fetch quests to complete."

As Shojin and Kokan headed for the quest board, arguing about the merits of dragon-slaying versus treasure-hunting, Kurohana remained in the yard, reigniting her fists with grim determination.

Scarlett moved through the landscape with a speed that defied her casual saunter. She reached the designated spot, a secluded clearing just inside the Sylphania border where the air already felt thinner, the divine wind a faint sigh. She stood waiting, her arms crossed.

“You’re getting slow, Yami,” she said to the empty air.

From the deep shadows of a gnarled pine, the demon butler materialized, his form solidifying without a sound. He bowed deeply. “My apologies, Lady Scarlett. Your little pendant works… remarkably well. I passed through the barrier with only a slight tingling sensation. It is… disconcerting.”

Scarlett allowed a faint, dry chuckle. “Good. I’d hate for my handiwork to be uncomfortable for you.” Her smile vanished. “Now, why are you here? And it’s good you came. I have questions.”

“I will try to answer every one,” Yami replied, his voice grave.

Scarlett’s mind raced back to Kael’s report in her office. Her tone lost all its lazy inflection. “I’ve heard a rumor, Yami. From a very reliable source. The barrier isn’t fading because of time or natural decay.”

Yami’s crimson eyes widened a fraction. It was the most surprise she had ever seen from him. “I… I did not know this. My network has heard whispers of instability, but the cause… no.” He straightened, his own purpose for coming overriding his shock. “I am here because I heard a different rumor, one I could verify. The great Demon Lords of the assembled realms have sent someone. A hunter. His mission is to capture Lord Shuen’s heir… Lady Enji.”

Scarlett’s blood ran cold, but her expression remained a mask of bored annoyance. “Oh, is that all? That’s what you came all this way to tell me? I’ve got guild members who try to steal her breakfast muffins. She has threats here, too.”

“It is not like it sounds, Lady Scarlett,” Yami insisted, his voice dropping to a hushed, fearful whisper. “They did not send just any mercenary. They sent someone known only by the name of Shadow Fang.”

The name hung in the air, and even the forest around them seemed to grow still.

“Shadow Fang,” Scarlett repeated, the name tasting like ash. “I’ve heard the stories. One of the Demon Lord’s most loyal and deadliest warriors. The legends say he single-handedly slaughtered an entire rogue demon kingdom for defying the Council. He left no one alive. Not the warriors. Not the children. Not the animals in the stables.”

Yami gave a slow, grim nod. “The very same. He is a ghost. A myth made flesh. And he is now in this world, hunting her.”

Scarlett scoffed, a forced sound of bravado. “So that’s the big threat? Let him come. No demon can cross the divine wind barrier. It doesn’t matter how weak it gets; its fundamental nature rejects your kind. He’ll be vaporized the moment he touches it.”

Yami’s gaze was unwavering. “But the pendant you gave me… it let me in.”

“Because it’s divine,” Scarlett shot back, tapping the source of her own power. “It’s woven from the same wind as the barrier itself. It masks your nature, it doesn’t change it. A demon, no matter how powerful, cannot create or command the divine. It’s impossible.”

But as she said the words, the conversation with Kael echoed in her mind with terrifying clarity. ‘It’s not thinning naturally, Master Scarlett.’

Something is attacking it.
Something more powerful than a god.

Her own theory crumbled. If the barrier was being actively weakened by an external force, a force that could contend with the divine… then the rules were changing. If a power existed that could erode the divine wind, could it also, perhaps, find a way to circumvent it? To forge a key?

Scarlett’s mind raced, the grumpy guild master gone, replaced by the ancient, strategic mind of the thirteenth founder. The mystery was no longer just about a fading shield; it was about an active, unimaginable enemy. And the shadow they had cast now had a name.

Shadow Fang was coming. And the divine wind might not be enough to stop him.

The chapter ends, the peaceful training yard and youthful crushes of Sylax a world away, as a cold, professional fear took root in Scarlett’s heart—a fear she hadn’t felt since the last great war. The shadow over Sylphania had just grown teeth.

Chapter 40: The Assassin Unmasked

The secluded clearing near the border was heavy with unspoken fears. Scarlett's bravado had faded, replaced by a cold, calculating silence as she processed Yami's news.

"Shadow Fang," she repeated, the name a final nail in the coffin of her hopes for a simple solution. "They're not playing games. They sent their best executioner for a grieving girl."

"He is more than an executioner, Lady Scarlett," Yami corrected, his voice hushed. "He is a force of nature. A symbol of the Council's absolute will. Where he walks, hope dies."

"And you're sure he's already here? In Sylphania?" Scarlett pressed, her mind racing through the implications.

"The rumors are specific. He was dispatched over a month ago. If he is as efficient as the legends say, he has already found a way across the barrier. Your theory that no demon can cross… I fear it may be outdated."

Scarlett's crimson eyes narrowed. "The pendant I gave you works because it's woven from my power—a divine wind. A demon cannot create or command that. It's impossible. So how did he cross?" She stared into the middle distance, a horrifying theory forming. "Unless… he didn't need to create it. Unless someone else gave him a key. Yami, the weakening barrier… it's not a natural decay. It's an attack. And if something—or someone—can attack the divine wind, then it stands to reason that same power could forge a key for its agents."

Yami's usually composed face paled. "You speak of a power that rivals the gods. Someone else with Divinity… aiding the demons?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Scarlett whispered, the weight of ten thousand years pressing down on her. "There's a traitor in the heavens, or a new player on the board with power we can't comprehend. And they've unleashed Shadow Fang right under our noses."

Far from the border, in the rocky foothills of the Serpent's Spine mountains, a different kind of chaos was unfolding.

"BRO! LEFT SIDE! ITS LEFT SIDE IS OPEN!" Shojin yelled, ducking under a sweep of the creature's spiked tail.

"I am aware!" Kokan called back, his voice calm despite the danger. He was already moving, a stream of water coalescing into his Moonlit Tide Cutter. The target wasn't the beast itself, but the base of the large, crystalline shells on its back.

Their quest was simple, in theory: collect three Drake Shells. The reality was a furious, house-sized Drake-Lizard, a lesser dragonkin that took extreme exception to having its naturally shed shells harvested.

The creature breathed a cone of searing embers. Shojin didn't retreat; he met it with a focused jet of his own fire, creating a spectacular explosion of sparks and heat that forced the beast to recoil.

"NOW, KOKAN!"

In that moment of distraction, Kokan' water blade, sharper than any diamond-tipped saw, sliced through the ancient connective tissue holding one of the large, iridescent shells. It fell to the ground with a heavy thud.

"ONE DOWN!" Shojin cheered, already looking for the next one. "See? We've got this! We're an awesome team!"

Kokan allowed himself a small, breathless smirk, retrieving the shell. "Do not become overconfident. It is still a Drake-Lizard. And you are still shouting."

"IT'S PART OF MY CHARM!"

Back at the Sylax guild, the training yard was finally empty. Kurohana Enji, drenched in sweat and her muscles screaming in protest, decided she had pushed herself enough for one morning. A deep, gnawing hunger convinced her to head inside for lunch, completely unaware that the deadliest hunter in two worlds was closing in on her location.

One Month Ago, The Demon Royal Court

Kagemaru, known to the whispers of the fearful as Shadow Fang, moved through his katas in a courtyard of polished obsidian. His black cape was utterly still, a pool of darkness in the flickering torchlight. A demon knight approached, armor clanking, but stopped a respectful ten paces away, visibly trembling.

"L-Lord Kagemaru… the High Council summons you."

Kagemaru finished his movement, sheathing his blade in a single, silent motion. He didn't reply. He simply turned and walked past the knight, who flinched as his shadow passed over him.

The Demon Court was a cavernous hall of terror and power. Multiple Demon Lords sat on jagged thrones of elemental malice, and at the center, shrouded in an aura of such pure darkness it hurt to look upon, sat the Demon King. No features were visible, only a silhouette of ultimate authority.

Kagemaru knelt, his head bowed. "It is my honor to be summoned by the greatest Demon Lords." His voice was calm, devoid of fear or flattery, a simple statement of fact.

A deep, resonant voice, the source unclear, echoed through the hall. “Rise, Shadow Fang. We have a task for you.”

Curiosity, a rare emotion for him, flickered. “Who?”

A rolled parchment was flung from the shadows of a throne. Kagemaru caught it without looking, unrolling it to reveal a meticulously drawn portrait of a young girl with dark hair and intense eyes. “A demon girl?”

“Not an ordinary demon girl,” a different lord hissed, his voice like grinding stone. “The secret daughter of Shuen Akumao.”

Kagemaru’s composure cracked. His void-black eyes widened a fraction. “Daughter of Lord Shuen… the Great Demon Lord of the Fire Realm…” The legendary lord who advocated for peace, executed for his love of a human. He had a child.

“Yes,” another voice confirmed. “Kurohana Enji. She carries the blood of a Demon Lord. We must capture her before her power fully awakens.”

“We have intelligence that she has fled to Sylphania,” a third lord added.

This time, the shock was visible. “Sylphania? It is not possible. A demon cannot cross the barrier. We would be destroyed.”

From the central shroud of darkness, the Demon King’s voice rolled out, a wave of oppressive power that made the very air tremble. “It means there is someone… who is Divine.”

Kagemaru’s head bowed lower. This was beyond his understanding. He was a weapon of shadow and death, not theology. “How can I enter? If I try, I will be destroyed.”

The Demon King gestured, and a simple silver locket was tossed through the air. It landed at Kagemaru’s feet. “Drop your blood upon it. Then go to Sylphania. I want Enji.”

Kagemaru picked up the locket. It was cold, inert. He did not question. He was a tool. He pricked his finger with a claw, let a single drop of his black blood fall onto the metal. It was absorbed instantly, and a faint, sinister purple glow pulsed within. He stood, turned, and walked from the court without another word.

Two Days Ago, A Sylphania Border Town Bar

Kagemaru walked into a raucous tavern, his entrance causing an immediate, unconscious ripple of discomfort. Patrons shifted away from the door, their laughter dying in their throats without knowing why. His cape flowed around him like living smoke, the purple runes on his robes glowing faintly.

A beautiful, bold human woman with a confident smile sauntered over, leaning against the bar next to him. “Well, hello there, handsome. You look like you could use some fun. Buy a girl a drink?”

He ignored her, his gaze scanning the room.

She pouted, undeterred. “Oh, come on. Strong and silent type? I like that.” She traced a finger along his shoulder. A flicker of surprise crossed his mind. She was not weak. His natural aura, which made most humans feel a primal dread, seemed to slide off her. This one had a strong spirit.

“Oh, handsome, you’re thinking hard. Let’s play,” she cooed.

He remained a statue.

She sighed dramatically, her pout returning. “Oi,” she said, tracing her finger now along his jawline. “Say something. Anything. Are you unable to speak?”

Finally, he spoke, his voice a low, chilling baritone that made her breath hitch for a second. “I have a question.”

She leaned in, intrigued. “Ask me anything, handsome.”

He produced the picture of Kurohana Enji. “Do you know where I can find her?”

The woman’s face fell into an annoyed pout. “Agh! That’s your question? You’re so boring!” She rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. Okay… yeah, I think I saw her. About a month back, I was coming back from visiting my family. I stopped near that guild.”

“Which guild?”

“The Untamed Guild of Sylphania. Sylax. It’s the lowest-ranked guild in the kingdom, but they’re… memorable.” She gestured vaguely. “There’s a shop near there where I was buying some herbs. I saw her with a couple of other kids. She’s an adventurer there.” She leaned in again, her curiosity piqued. “So? Why are you looking for her? Is she your girlfriend? Your daughter? Your runaway wife?”

Kagemaru didn’t reply. He turned and walked out of the bar, leaving the woman staring after him, equal parts frustrated and unnerved.

Present Day

Now, Kagemaru stood at the edge of a bustling town, the signpost reading “Welcome to Oakhaven.” The directions had been vague, but the name “Sylax” was a beacon. He had asked, he had threatened, he had sighed at the incompetence of mortals. And now, he was here.

The chaotic, joyful noise of the town spilled out towards him, a stark contrast to the silence that followed in his wake. His void-black eyes with their faint violet rings scanned the buildings, his senses reaching out, searching for the specific, unique demonic signature he was hired to find.

He had finally found the town that housed the Untamed Guild.

A slow, predatory smile touched his lips, unseen by the happy, oblivious townsfolk around him.

“Finally,” Kagemaru, the Shadow Fang, whispered to himself, and the shadows at his feet seemed to writhe in anticipation.

The hunter was at the gate. And his prey was inside, hungry and unaware, her only shield a guild that had no idea what was coming for them

Chapter 41: Marked by Shadows

Kurohana Enji sat at a secluded corner table in the Sylax mess hall, a bastion of relative calm amidst the usual lunchtime cacophony. She picked at a plate of roasted chicken and potatoes, her mind wandering. Where is Master Scarlett? she wondered. Probably asleep on her office couch, curled up like a lazy cat, completely oblivious to the world. A small, fond chuckle escaped her. That's our master. She was blissfully unaware that the Guild Master was miles away, grappling with a threat far greater than any of them could imagine.

"Hey! Hey, Kuro!" a voice chirped. Hina slid into the seat opposite her, her sharp eyes scanning Kurohana's face. "I thought you were on a quest with the two brats."

Kurohana shook her head, forcing a smile. "No. I needed to train more."

"Oh, mind if I join you?" Hina asked, already making herself comfortable. "This is the best spot in the guild. You can see the chaos without being trampled by it." She was right. The table was tucked behind a large, carved pillar, hidden from the main thoroughfare of yelling adventurers, flying food, and arm-wrestling matches.

In the town of Oakhaven, a silence was spreading like a plague. Kagemaru walked down the main street, his black cape flowing unnaturally, as if soaking up the very light around him. The cheerful market stalls, the laughing children, the bustling townsfolk—as he passed, their joy died. People clutched their chests, feeling an inexplicable dread. Some stumbled, others collapsed against walls, vomiting from a terror they couldn't name or understand. He didn't even look at them. His void-black eyes with their faint violet rings were fixed ahead, on the large, slightly crooked building that pulsed with life and noise. The Untamed Guild of Sylphania.

He stood before its gates, a statue of impending doom. A predatory smile, cold and utterly devoid of warmth, graced his lips.

BOOM.

The double doors of the guild hall creaked open under the sheer pressure of his will.

Every head in the hall turned. The chaos didn't just stop; it was vacuumed out of the room, replaced by a heavy, suffocating silence. All eyes were drawn to the figure in the doorway, a man who looked like a piece of the night had torn itself loose and taken a hateful form.

Kagemaru's voice, a deep, resonant baritone that seemed to vibrate in their very bones, echoed in the dead quiet.

"So," he said, his gaze sweeping over the frozen adventurers. "You are the humans who are hiding the heir of the Demon Lord."

At the corner table, Kurohana choked on her water. The glass slipped from her nerveless fingers, shattering on the floor. She felt it then—a demonic aura, refined, ancient, and drenched in blood. It was a pressure she hadn't felt since her father's court. How? Why was one of them here? Inside Sylphania? She froze, her blood running cold.

Hina noticed her friend's violent reaction, the pure terror on her face. She didn't understand why, but her instincts screamed danger. She placed a warning hand on Kurohana's arm under the table, her eyes wide, signaling: Don't move. Don't make a sound.

The rest of the guild was recovering from its shock, replacing silence with a low, building growl of anger.

A grizzled old dwarf from the Ironclaw Battalion, Thrain, stepped forward, his warhammer held tight. "Hey! You duffer! Who in the blazes are you, and what's this nonsense about a demon lord's heir?"

The word 'duffer' hung in the air.

In a movement too fast to follow, Kagemaru was simply there. He hadn't walked; he had flowed through the space between them. His hand was around Thrain's thick neck, lifting the heavily armored dwarf off the ground as if he were a child.

"I am the end of your ignorance," Kagemaru whispered, his face inches from Thrain's purpling one.

That was the spark. The guild erupted.

"GET HIM!" someone roared.

A wave of adventurers surged forward—mages, warriors, rogues. Spells of fire and ice flew. Daggers were thrown. Swords were swung.

Kagemaru didn't even bother drawing his own blade. He dropped Thrain, who gasped for air on the floor.

"Silence Zone."

The effect was instantaneous. A twenty-meter sphere centered on Kagemaru became a void of absolute sound. Spells fizzled out mid-cast, their incantations unspoken. War cries died in throats. The only sound was the frantic, internal hammering of their own hearts. The silence was more terrifying than any roar.

Then, the shadows attacked.

From the feet of every adventurer near him, their own shadows twisted, stretched, and solidified into dark, man-shaped tendrils. Shadow Control. The tendrils wrapped around limbs, throats, and weapons, holding them fast. Adventurers struggled against their own darkness, eyes wide with panic and confusion.

Kagemaru moved through the paralyzed crowd like a reaper. He didn't kill. He maimed. A precise chop to the shoulder of a swordsman, dislocating the joint. A kick to the knee of a charging brawler, shattering the kneecap with an audible crack that was felt, not heard. He was a whirlwind of efficient, brutal violence.

“Where is the heir?” his voice was a psychic intrusion in the silent zone, heard directly in their minds. “The girl, Kurohana Enji. Where are you hiding her?”

“SHE’S NOT HERE, YOU MONSTER!” a young elven mage screamed, breaking free of the psychic silence for a moment before a shadowy fist slammed into her stomach, making her vomit blood.

James, the guild’s head chef, burst out of the kitchen, his face a mask of horror. He saw Akira and the other receptionists slumped over their desks, clutching their chests, blood trickling from their noses from the sheer psychic pressure. He saw newbie adventurers collapsed on the floor, unconscious. He saw the stronger members—the Shadow Talons, the Stormbreakers—straining against the shadows that held them, their faces contorted in rage and helplessness.

“LET THEM GO!” James bellowed, hefting a massive meat cleaver. He charged.

Kagemaru sidestepped the wild swing, grabbed James’s wrist, and twisted. The sound of breaking bone was a sickening crunch in the psychic silence. James cried out, falling to his knees. Kagemaru looked down at him with utter dispassion.

“Insects,” the word echoed in all their minds. “You protect a creature that will be your doom. Tell me where she is, and the pain ends.”

From the upstairs balcony, Mio Amatsuki emerged, woken by the terrifying, silent energy. She took in the scene below, her violet eyes widening. She saw the shadows—but her own remained still, unaffected. Her celestial nature, a gift from her Pact, seemed to grant her immunity. She saw James injured, her guild family being systematically broken. A cold fury settled over her.

Back at the corner table, hidden by the pillar and the chaos, Kurohana was trembling violently. Hina’s grip on her hand was tight, her knuckles white.

“Kuro, don’t move,” Hina whispered, her voice barely audible. “He doesn’t know we’re here. It’s okay. It’s normal to be scared.” She misinterpreted Kurohana’s terror as that of a newbie facing an overwhelming threat, not the specific, personal horror of a heir being hunted.

Kurohana's mind raced. Jakan's tormented face. Yami's solemn warning. Her father's smile. It was all because of her. These people, her new family, were being hurt because of her.

Tears of rage and guilt welled in her eyes. She wanted to scream, to stand, to unleash her fire and face him. But Hina's hand held her down, and a deeper, survival instinct kept her frozen. The Shadow Fang was here. For her.

The guild hall was a painting of despair. The strong were held captive by their own darkness. The weak were broken on the floor. The air was thick with the metallic scent of blood and the silent screams of a family under attack. And at the center of it all, Kagemaru stood, calm and collected, a demon in a hall of heroes, patiently, brutally, asking his question over and over.

"Where is the heir?"

Unaware of the battle for their home, Shojin and Kokan stood over the defeated Drake-Lizard. The third and final iridescent shell was in Kokan's hands.

"YES! We did it!" Shojin cheered, pumping a sooty fist into the air. "See? We're the best team ever! We should fight a real dragon next!"

Kokan carefully stored the shell in his pack, his expression thoughtful. "Our efficiency improved by thirty-seven percent from the first shell to the last. The teamwork is… effective." It was the highest praise he could give.

They had no idea that their sanctuary was being defiled, that their friends were bleeding, and that the girl they had sworn to protect was hiding in terror, just a few miles away.

Far from the guild, Scarlett sat alone on a stump where Yami had left her. The words "Shadow Fang" and "weakening barrier" echoed in her mind, a terrifying symphony. She stared at her hands, the hands that could command the divine wind, and felt a chilling helplessness. If the demons had a key, if they had divine help… then they were no longer fighting a war. They were facing an extermination.

The sun began to set, casting long shadows. But the darkest shadow was the one that had just fallen over the heart of her guild, and she was too far away to see it. The hunter had found his way inside, and the hunt had begun.

Chapter 42: Clash of Shadows

Time seemed to stretch and warp in the silent, suffocating horror of the Sylax guild hall. Hina's mind, usually a whirlwind of sarcastic calculations, was now racing through desperate, tactical options. She kept her hand firmly on Kurohana's trembling arm, her voice a barely audible whisper meant only for her friend's ear.

"Kuro, I have a plan," Hina breathed, her eyes fixed on the demonic figure breaking their family. "I'll create a distraction. You attack him from the side. Look, Mio is on the balcony. She'll see us and join in. We can triangulate him."

Kurohana's eyes, wide with a fear that ran deeper than Hina could ever know, met hers. The guilt was a physical weight, crushing her. These people were suffering for her. Her hiding was costing them their safety, their blood.

"No," Kurohana whispered back, her voice surprisingly firm despite her terror. "Change the plan. I'll be the distraction."

Hina's eyes widened in protest. "Are you insane? That's suicide! He'll crush you!"

But when she looked into Kurohana's eyes again, she didn't see just fear. She saw a flicker of the same untamed fire that defined their guild. She saw a resolve forged in a personal hell Hina couldn't comprehend. It was a look that brooked no argument.

Hina let out a tight, frustrated sigh. "...Okay. But the second it goes wrong, you run. Understood?"

Kurohana gave a single, sharp nod. In her mind, the mantra repeated: It's my fault. He is finding me. I have to protect them. I have to be worthy of my father's name.

She took a deep, shuddering breath and stood up from the hidden table.

A wave of panicked whispers and shouts erupted from the guild members who could still speak, their voices strained against the shadowy bonds and psychic pressure.

"Kuro, no! Run!"
"Kid,get out of here!"
"What are you doing?!"

She ignored them. Each step forward was an act of will, pushing against the debilitating demonic aura that screamed at her to kneel, to submit. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat of terror, but her posture remained tall. She stopped, twenty feet from Kagemaru, who was casually examining the claws of a shadowy tendril holding a groaning adventurer.

Her voice, when it came, was cold and clear, cutting through the oppressive silence like a shard of ice. It was loud, defiant, and echoed with a regal authority that no one in the guild had ever heard from her.

“You wanted me? Then look at me. I’m right here.”

Kagemaru’s head slowly tilted. He released the dwarf he was holding, letting the warrior collapse to the floor, vomiting a stream of crimson. Every adventurer stared in shock, their minds reeling. What was she doing? Was she trying to get herself killed?

“So if you want me—fine.” Kurohana continued, her fists clenching at her sides, her knuckles white. “But touch another soul here, and I swear… even if you stand at the peak of darkness, I’ll drag you down myself.”

A collective, horrified gasp went through the hall. Hina, from her hiding spot, couldn't help a spark of admiration. Wow. She’s selling the distraction. She’s braver than I thought.

Kagemaru finally turned fully to face her. He didn’t move with urgency, but with a predator’s lazy curiosity. His predatory smile returned, wider this time. He tilted his head, studying her as if she were a fascinating insect that had just learned to speak.

“A demon lord heir,” he mused, his voice a dark caress in their minds, “stepping forward to protect insects…” He took a single, slow step towards her. “How quaint.” Another step. “How inefficient.”

This was the signal. While his attention was fully on Kurohana, Hina moved. She was a blur of motion, her ponytail whipping behind her as she vaulted over a overturned table. She didn’t yell; she channeled her magic into a precise, concussive blast of force aimed directly at his back.

At the same moment, Mio Amatsuki dropped from the balcony like a falling star. Her sword was already drawn, gleaming with celestial light, aimed in a silent, deadly arc for his shoulder.

Kagemaru didn’t even turn. He simply… flowed. His body dissolved into shadows for a split second, the attacks passing harmlessly through the space he had occupied. He reappeared instantly, his hand snapping out and closing around Hina’s throat, lifting her off the ground. Her eyes bulged, her hands clawing at his immovable grip.

“A clever little insect,” he said, his gaze still locked on Kurohana. “But still an insect.”

Kurohana’s plan to surrender shattered. Seeing Hina’s face begin to turn purple, seeing the brave, sarcastic girl who had tried to protect her now at the mercy of this monster, something inside her broke. The fear was burned away, replaced by a roaring, incandescent fury. The carefully constructed human illusion she wore tore apart.

The air around her shimmered with heat. From her forehead, two elegant, blood-red horns curled into existence. From her back, large, membranous wings of shadow and ember erupted, tearing through her tunic. Her blood-red eyes blazed with an inner fire.

“YES!” she roared, her voice now layered with a demonic echo that shook the very foundations of the hall. “I AM THE DAUGHTER OF THE FIRE DEMON REALM! I AM KUROHANA ENJI, DAUGHTER OF LORD SHUEN!”

The revelation hit the guild with the force of a physical blow. The stunned silence was absolute. Akira, bleeding at her desk, stared in disbelief. James, clutching his broken arm, looked on in shock. Every adventurer held in shadow control could only watch, their minds struggling to reconcile the quiet, determined girl they knew with the demonic heir now standing before them.

Kagemaru’s smile finally reached his eyes, a true expression of dark pleasure. He dropped Hina, who collapsed, gasping, to the floor. “At last. The truth unveils itself.”

Kurohana didn’t wait. She launched herself forward, no longer a girl, but a force of vengeful nature. Her fist, wreathed in black and crimson hellfire, slammed towards his face.

The fight began in earnest.

Kagemaru met her charge, not with a weapon, but with an open palm. Her fiery punch impacted his hand, and the resulting shockwave blasted outwards, shattering the remaining windows and sending tables skidding across the floor.

He was impossibly fast. He moved around her attacks, his cape lashing out like a living entity, deflecting her flames. He was testing her, analyzing her style, his void-black eyes missing nothing.

“You have his fire,” Kagemaru commented calmly, ducking under a sweeping kick that left a trail of scorched earth on the floor. “But you lack his control. Your emotions make you sloppy.”

“SHUT UP!” Kurohana screamed, unleashing a torrent of fire. He simply parted it with a wave of his hand, the flames harmlessly washing around him.

From the sidelines, the guild could only watch, trapped in their personal nightmares. They saw their friend, their guildmate, revealed as a demon, fighting a losing battle against an unstoppable assassin to protect them. The confusion was immense, but it was slowly being burned away by a dawning, protective fury. They saw the determination on her face, the way she put herself between them and this monster. She was one of theirs, regardless of her blood.

Mio helped a coughing Hina to her feet. They shared a look—a mix of shock, fear, and renewed resolve. They had to help. They had to break the shadow control.

Kurohana fought with everything she had, a whirlwind of fire and fury. But for every attack she launched, Kagemaru had a counter. He was playing with her. He grabbed her wrist during a punch, his grip like iron, and twisted, forcing her to her knees.

“A valiant effort, little heir,” he said, his face close to hers. “But this is where your story ends.”

He raised his other hand, shadows coalescing into a blade of pure void above her head. The guild members, still bound, screamed their silent protests, their eyes filled with fire and helpless rage.

This was not a clash of equals. It was the end of the hunt. And the Shadow Fang had won.

Chapter 43: Daughter of the Demon Flame

The grand hall of Sylax was no longer a place of chaotic joy. It was a slaughterhouse of hope. The scene was one of pure, unadulterated horror. Adventurers, the strong and the new alike, were frozen in a macabre tableau, held fast by the living shadows that sprouted from their own feet. The shadows wrapped around limbs, tightened around throats, and pinned weapons to the floor. They were an audience to their own guild's destruction, forced to watch through a lens of utter powerlessness.

Their eyes, wide with a mixture of terror and fury, were fixed on the three figures still standing against the tide of darkness.

Kurohana Enji, in her full demonic glory, was a storm of rage and grief. Her hellfire roared from her fists and wings, painting the air in strokes of black and crimson. She fought not like a trained warrior, but like a cornered animal, every strike fueled by the sight of her broken, bleeding guild.

Mio Amatsuki was her opposite—a silent, celestial tempest. Her sword, gleaming with moonlight, moved in precise, deadly arcs, a counterpoint to Kurohana's wild inferno. Her face was a mask of serene focus, but her violet eyes burned with a cold fire.

Hina, the strategist, was a blur of motion, using her intellect to create openings. She didn't have raw power; she had precision. Concussive blasts of force aimed at joints, illusions to misdirect, anything to give the other two a split-second advantage.

It wasn't enough.

Kagemaru moved between them like smoke. He didn't block their attacks; he negated them. A Void Slash would cut through the air where Mio had been a moment before, the very space ripping apart. A wave of Kurohana's hellfire would part around an invisible shield, washing harmlessly against the walls.

"Is this the extent of your resolve?" Kagemaru's voice was a calm, mocking whisper in their minds, even as he effortlessly dodged a combined lunge from Mio and Kurohana. "The mighty heir and her celestial guard? You fight with passion. I fight with purpose. There is a universe of difference."

He was playing with them. A flick of his wrist sent a Shadow Clone to grapple with Kurohana, its cold, dark hands sizzling against her fiery skin. As Mio moved to help, he was suddenly in front of her, his cape lashing out and wrapping around her sword arm, the cursed runes glowing malevolently.

“Your light is bright, little star,” he mused, yanking her off balance. “But it is a candle against the abyss.”

“LET HER GO!” Kurohana roared, incinerating the clone and charging.

He released Mio and turned to meet Kurohana’s charge. Instead of dodging, he caught her fist in his palm. The impact was like a thunderclap. He didn’t flinch.

“You have your father’s spirit,” he said, his grip tightening, bones creaking under his fingers. “But you lack his discipline. He would never be so… reckless.”

He shoved her back, and in the same motion, turned his attention to Hina, who was preparing another spell.

“And you, the clever insect. Your distractions grow tedious.”

He didn’t even move. A tendril of shadow, thicker and faster than the others, shot from the floor and slammed into Hina’s chest. There was a sickening crack of ribs. Her eyes flew wide, her spell dying on her lips as she was lifted off her feet and hurled across the room. She hit the far wall with a dull, final thud and slid to the floor, motionless.

A silent, collective scream of anguish went through the guild.

Sakura, a veteran warrior of the Stormbreaker team, strained against her shadowy bonds with every ounce of her immense strength. Her muscles bulged, veins popping on her forehead, but the darkness held fast, unyielding as diamond. She watched Hina, a girl she’d seen grow from a clever toddler into a brilliant adventurer, fall. She saw the two remaining girls, panting, bleeding, fighting a battle they couldn’t win. A hot, shameful tear escaped her eye, tracing a clean path through the grime on her cheek. It was a feeling shared by every single adventurer present—a profound, gut-wrenching helplessness. They were warriors, protectors, and they could do nothing but watch as children fought and died for them.

Move! Sakura’s mind screamed. BREAK!
But the shadows only tightened their grip,a constant, mocking reminder of their failure.

The fight was now down to two. Kurohana and Mio stood back-to-back, their breaths coming in ragged, painful gasps. The initial fury had burned away, leaving only the cold, hard reality of their situation. They were going to lose.

“Mio,” Kurohana whispered, her demonic voice cracking with exhaustion. “I’m… I’m sorry. This is my fault.”

“No,” Mio replied, her voice steady despite her trembling limbs. “He is the fault. We are Sylax. We fight together.”

Kagemaru applauded slowly, the sound a psychic slap. “A touching sentiment. Truly. It

almost makes this worthwhile.” His demeanor shifted. The calm analysis was gone, replaced by a wild, manic energy. The enjoyment of facing resistance was taking over. “Let’s see how brightly your little star can burn before it is extinguished!”

He lunged at Mio, his movements becoming faster, more unpredictable. He was a whirlwind of shadows and void. Mio met his assault, her sword a blur of light. For a few seconds, it was a beautiful, deadly dance—celestial silver against abyssal black.

“CELESTIAL CRESCENT!” Mio yelled, putting every last bit of her power into one final, desperate technique. Her sword flared with the light of a newborn moon.

At the exact same moment, seeing her opening, Kurohana tapped into the very core of her heritage, the unrefined, raw power of the Fire Demon Lord. “HELLFIRE INFERNO!”

A torrent of pure, black demon fire, shot through with veins of celestial light, roared towards Kagemaru. It was a impossible fusion of opposites, a testament to their desperate synergy.

The attack struck him head-on.

For the first time, Kagemaru was forced back a step. A grunt of surprise escaped him. The combined energy exploded, scorching the floor and sending shockwaves through the hall. When the light and fire faded, a thin trail of black smoke rose from a tear in his robe on his shoulder. A minor scratch.

He looked at the singed fabric, then back at them. A slow, crazy, wide smile spread across his face, and a low chuckle escaped him, building into a full, manic laugh that echoed psychically, shredding at their sanity.

“MARVELOUS!” he roared, his eyes alight with a deranged joy. “Such spirit! To think you could actually touch me! This is a hunt worthy of legend!”

His laughter cut off abruptly. His gaze locked onto Mio.

“But all good things must end.”

He vanished. Not in a blur of speed, but completely. One moment he was there, the next, he was simply gone from everyone’s sight.

“Where did he—?” Kurohana spun around, her senses overwhelmed.

A whisper, right behind Mio’s ear. “Here.”

He rematerialized, his hand already thrusting forward. Not with a shadow blade, but with his own fingers, sharpened into points of solidified void. The attack was aimed not to kill, but to cripple, to punish, to show his absolute dominance.

Mio’s eyes widened, her celestial senses screaming a warning a fraction of a second too late. She started to turn, her sword coming up in a desperate, last-ditch parry.

The chapter ends with Kagemaru’s void-claw inches from Mio’s spine, the outcome hanging in the balance, and the entire guild screaming their silent, helpless protests into the suffocating darkness.

Chapter 44: The Tide Turns

The sound was not a slash or a crash. It was a sickening, wet TWACK! that echoed with finality in the psychic silence. Kagemaru's shadow, solidified into a vicious spike, had struck Mio from behind, the tip bursting out through her midriff.

For a horrific second, she was suspended in the air by the shadowy impalement, her eyes wide with shock, her mouth forming a silent 'O'. Then, the shadow retracted, and she dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. Her celestial sword clattered to the floor, the ringing of its fall the only sound besides the drip, drip, drip of her blood hitting the wooden planks.

With a casual, almost bored flick of his wrist, Kagemaru used another tendril of shadow to hurl her broken body towards the reception desk. She crashed into it, wood splintering, before sliding down to the floor in a heap. Her hand weakly clutched the grievous wound, blood seeping between her fingers. Her eyes, losing their violet light, fluttered shut. But just before unconsciousness claimed her, a single, breathless word escaped her lips, a plea meant for the one person who could fix anything.

"Master…!"

It was a whisper, but in the guild's collective heart, it was a scream.

The thought echoed through every trapped adventurer's mind, a desperate, silent prayer.
Where are you, Master?
Isamu… Hayate… Yudai… anyone!
Someone, please come back!

Their minds recited the names of every member out on a quest, their hope a fragile, dying ember. They could only watch as Kagemaru turned his mad, grinning attention back to the last one standing.

Kurohana Enji stood panting, her demonic form flickering. Her hellfire was guttering, her wings drooping. She was running on fumes, on sheer, stubborn will. Kagemaru circled her, laughing, a crazed, joyful sound.

"Just you and me now, little heir! The last flicker of your father's doomed legacy! Let's make this final dance a memorable one!"

He didn't even bother with a complex technique. He simply gathered a massive orb of condensed void and shadow in his palm, a sphere of nothingness that seemed to suck the light and sound from the very air around it. It was an executioner's stroke.

"DIE WITH HONOR!" he roared, and thrust the sphere forward.

Kurohana closed her eyes, bracing for the end, her final thought not of her throne, but of her friends—Shojin's grin, Kokan's calm, the chaotic warmth of the guild.

But the annihilation never came.

The sphere of shadow stopped. It froze mere inches from her face, quivering, as if it had hit an invisible wall.

Kagemaru's manic smile faltered. He pushed with his will, but the shadow refused to obey. It was being… manipulated. Controlled by another.

The shadows holding the adventurers didn't just loosen; they dissolved. The oppressive Silence Zone shattered, and the guild hall was suddenly filled with the sounds of ragged gasps, pained moans, and the clatter of dozens of people collapsing to the floor, freed from their binds.

All eyes, wide with shock and dawning hope, turned upwards.

There, on the upstairs balcony, stood a figure as familiar as the guild's own heartbeat.

Guild Master Scarlett.

Her crimson eyes swept across the hall, and what she saw tore a hole in her soul. This wasn't her guild. This was a charnel house. The cheerful, chaotic mess was gone, replaced by a landscape of pain. Akira and the receptionists were pale and trembling, clutching their chests. James sat against a wall, cradling his grotesquely bent arm, his face ashen. Adventurers she had watched grow from rowdy youngsters into capable warriors were bleeding on the floor, their eyes filled with shame and pain. Hina lay in an unmoving heap. Mio Amatsuki, one of her Celestia Pact, was slumped against the shattered reception desk, a pool of crimson spreading beneath her. And in the center stood Kurohana, her demonic form a testament to a secret she had been forced to reveal, battered, broken, but still defiant.

The hope in the adventurers' eyes was instantly replaced by a wave of pure, unadulterated rage that emanated from their master. It was a cold, ancient fury that made the air crackle.

Scarlett's voice, when it came, was deceptively soft, but it carried through the hall like the first rumble of an avalanche.

"Not yet."

She had manipulated his shadows. She had severed his control as easily as snipping a thread.

Kagemaru turned fully to face her, his head tilted in genuine, analytical curiosity. He saw her pointed ears. "A shadow elf," he mused, a hint of admiration in his tone. "To wrest control from me… impressive for an insect." He sighed, as if disappointed the interesting part was over. "But still, just an insect."

He was wrong. He saw the shadow elf. He did not see the human. And he certainly did not see the Divine.

He never saw her move.

One moment she was on the balcony. The next, she was standing between him and Kurohana. There was no blur, no sound. It was as if space itself had folded to her will.

Her rage was not a wild inferno like Kurohana's. It was a black hole. It was absolute zero. Her crimson eyes glowed with an inner light that promised oblivion.

Kagemaru's confidence finally cracked. He tried to summon his shadows, to create clones, to unleash a Void Slash. Nothing happened. The shadows in the room cowered from him and flocked to her. They were hers.

"What are you?" he whispered, his voice losing its mocking baritone for the first time.

Scarlett didn't answer with words. She answered with action.

The fight lasted less than thirty seconds.

It wasn't a battle; it was a dissection.

He lunged. She wasn't there. She appeared behind him, her finger tapping a point between his shoulder blades. A shockwave of pure force erupted inside his body, bypassing his armor, his demonic resilience. He coughed, stumbling forward, black blood spraying from his lips.

He spun, unleashing a wild flurry of attacks. She flowed between them, her movements so minimal they were almost imperceptible. A twist of her wrist deflected a bone-shattering kick. A tilt of her head avoided a grasp that could crush steel.

She grabbed the arm he used to strike her. There was a sound like grinding stone as she squeezed. The demonic bones in his forearm shattered into dust.

He screamed, a raw, genuine sound of pain and disbelief.

She didn't stop. A kick to his knee shattered the joint, dropping him to the ground. A chop to the base of his neck severed the connection between his brain and his body, leaving him paralyzed.

With a final, contemptuous flick of her wrist, the very shadows he had commanded rose from the floor like black serpents and wrapped around him, binding him tightly, cocooning him in the essence of his own power. He was trussed up like a game animal, his void-black eyes wide with shock and terror.

The guild hall, for a single, breathless moment, was silent. Then, a weak, disbelieving cheer erupted from the throats of the wounded and the freed. They had seen their Guild Master fight before, but never like this. This was not untamed power. This was primordial wrath.

The healers, finally free, rushed into action, their hands glowing with restorative magic as they triaged the worst injuries. Others helped their groaning friends to their feet.

But Scarlett didn't hear the cheers. Her rage, having served its purpose, evaporated, leaving behind a cold, hollow grief. She scanned the hall again, truly seeing the scale of the devastation. Her home. Her family.

Her gaze fell on Kurohana. The demon heir, who had fought so bravely for the guild that was supposed to be her sanctuary, gave one last, shuddering breath, her demonic form dissolving. Her horns and wings vanished, leaving behind just a terrified, exhausted young girl. Her eyes rolled back, and her legs gave way.

Scarlett was there in an instant. She didn't let her hit the floor. She caught Kurohana gently, one arm supporting her back, the other under her knees. She knelt, lowering the unconscious girl to the ground with a tenderness that was starkly at odds with the violence of moments before.

She looked down at Kurohana's pale, bruised face, then her eyes swept over her broken guild—over Mio's still form, over Hina's motionless body, over the blood and the pain.

The chaos was finished. But the silence that replaced it was infinitely worse. It was the silence of grief.

Chapter 45: The End of the Shadow

The walk back to the guild was filled with the easy, tired camaraderie of a completed quest. Kokan and Shojin walked with the returning Celestia Pact members, the bag of drake shells slung over Shojin's shoulder.

"See? Told you we could do it!" Shojin boasted, completely oblivious. "That drake didn't stand a chance! We're basically pros now!"

Kokan, ever observant, noticed the Crimson Fangs and other adventurers standing frozen at the guild's main gate. Their postures weren't relaxed; they were rigid with shock. Then he saw it—the shattered windows, the splintered frame.

"Shojin," Kokan said, his voice low. "Look."

Shojin finally stopped his chatter. "Huh? Why's everyone standing like statues? Did James run out of bacon again?"

But the others understood. The Celestia Pact, seasoned by their Decade Quest, felt the shift in the air—the silence where there should be chaos. They moved as one, pushing past the frozen figures at the gate and stepping inside.

And then, they too froze.

The scene that met them was a punch to the gut. Their home, the place of joyful anarchy, was a warzone. Blood stained the wooden floors. Tables and chairs were reduced to kindling. Injured adventurers and staff were everywhere, some being tended to by healers with glowing hands, others being helped to their feet by their comrades. The air was thick with the scent of iron, ozone, and pain.

Isamu rushed past them, his usual flirty swagger gone, his face a mask of pure panic as he sprinted towards the reception desk where Akira was being supported by another staff member.

The Celestia Pact's eyes swept the room and found their youngest. Kael and Yuki moved as if launched from a catapult, rushing to where Mio lay near the shattered reception desk, her form too still, her clothes dark with blood.

Shojin and Kokan's gazes, wide with disbelief, found their third. Kurohana Enji was on the floor, her form small and human again, bruised and unconscious. The breath left Kokan's lungs.

For a moment, the returning adventurers were paralyzed by the sheer scale of the devastation. Then, a switch flipped. Without a single word of question, they moved. The "why" didn't matter. The "who" was irrelevant. Their family was hurting.

Yuki was already on her knees, her hands glowing with a soft, lunar light over Mio’s grievous wound, her face tight with concentration. Kael was beside her, his wise eyes scanning the room, directing other Celestia members with sharp gestures. Hiro and Sora moved to help the guild staff. Liora and Sakura began organizing the triage of lesser injuries.

Shojin, for once utterly silent, dropped the bag of shells and ran to help a dwarf who was trying to stand on a broken leg. Kokan was at Kurohana’s side in an instant, his hands trembling slightly as he pulled a clean cloth from his pack and began gently wiping the blood from her face.

“I have to stay here,” he whispered, the words a pained vow meant only for himself. “I have to… she…”

A hand rested on his shoulder. He looked up to see Scarlett. The usual lazy grumpiness was gone from her face, replaced by a grief so profound it was a physical presence.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, her voice rough. “Now, only focus on helping everyone. It’s not anyone’s fault this time. We have to recover.” Her crimson eyes held his. “Your family needs you.”

Kokan stared, the words cutting through his guilt. “My family… needs me,” he repeated, the concept solidifying into a new kind of resolve. He gave a sharp nod and began working with renewed, clinical focus.

The guild hall, though devastated, began to thrum with a new, determined energy. It was chaotic, messy, and utterly, uniquely Sylax.

The Tank (Hayate, one arm hanging uselessly): "Nobody move, I’m doing a strategic medical rollout!" He proceeded to use his one good arm and his bulk to gently nudge a group of dazed newbies into a centralized, messy pile because he couldn’t lift them individually. "There. Efficient."

The Healer (A young cleric with a bloody gash on his own face, his staff visibly cracked): "SIT DOWN BEFORE I STAPLE YOU TO THE FLOOR!" he yelled at a rogue who was trying to walk on a sprained ankle. He was healing a deep cut on another adventurer’s arm while simultaneously scolding them like a tired mom at a grocery store.

The Rogue (Leaning against a wall, two nasty-looking puncture wounds in his side, yet still smirking): "Yo, Healer! I’m two hits from the afterlife over here. Prioritize me, I’m a premium asset!"

The healer, without looking up, summoned a small, glowing rock and threw it, hitting the rogue square in the forehead. "You’ll live. Shut up."

The Mage (His eyebrows completely singed off): "Right, bone-setting! I've read about this!" He started poking a groaning warrior's dislocated shoulder. "If it hurts, that means the magic is working! Probably!" It was very clear he had no idea what he was doing.

The Berserker (Waking up from being knocked out, looking utterly confused): "Did we win? Or did I lose consciousness in the middle of a motivational speech?" Nobody answered him. They were used to it.

They were a mess. They pulled each other up, insulted each other while applying bandages, carried unconscious friends like sacks of potatoes, and kept cracking weak jokes even as they themselves needed stitches. They leaned on each other's shoulders because none of them could stand straight on their own.

Through it all, Scarlett moved. She wasn't just watching; she was directing the chaos with brutal, sarcastic efficiency.

"Why is your arm bent like that? Do you think you're a pretzel? Mage, your eyebrows are gone again. Rogue, stop flirting with the healer, you're bleeding on the floor I haven't cleaned since last year," she lectured, never admitting she was worried.

She never coddled. But she was there, a steady, grumpy pillar in the storm.

The guild members would sneak glances at her. She stood for a moment, her shadow tendrils idly coiling around the thoroughly bound and terrified Kagemaru, her eyes scanning her messy, broken, beautiful guild. She closed her eyes and muttered, so softly only the sharpest ears could possibly hear:

"If any of you had died… I would have burned the entire continent to ashes."

A few adventurers nearby froze for a split second, then quickly went back to their work, pretending they hadn't heard a thing. She, in turn, pretended she had never said it.

She leaned against a smashed table, arms crossed, a tiny, almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of her mouth. "Idiots," she grumbled, her voice low and grating. "But somehow… not dead. Typical."

Her love was a silent, sharp-edged thing. She wouldn't hug them, but she'd obliterate anyone who harmed them. They all knew it.

Seeing that Kurohana, Mio, and Hina were stable but still unconscious, she barked out orders. "Alright! Sora, Kokan, Shojin! Carry these three little fighters upstairs to their rooms. Stay with them until they wake up. Help them if they need anything. Understood?"

Shojin and Sora opened their mouths to protest, to ask what happened, to do anything else. THWACK! THWACK!

Two swift chops to their heads silenced them.

Without another word, Shojin gently gathered Mio into his arms, his usual density replaced with a surprising tenderness. Kokan did the same with Enji, his movements precise and careful. Sora lifted Hina, her perky demeanor subdued by concern.

Sakura watched them go, standing beside Scarlett. "They fought well," the veteran warrior whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Scarlett watched her three youngest apprentices being carried to safety by their friends, her gaze lingering on the staircase.

"Yeah," Scarlett replied, the single word laden with a universe of pride, grief, and fierce, untamable love. "They did."

The guild was broken, but it was breathing. It was wounded, but it was healing. And in the heart of the chaos, the untamed spirit of Sylax, forged in blood and laughter, refused to be extinguished.

Chapter 46: The Guild That Wouldn’t Break

The first rays of the morning sun streamed through the shattered windows of the Sylax guild hall, illuminating a scene that was equal parts field hospital, construction site, and the world's most stressful family reunion. The air, which usually smelled of beer and roasted meat, now carried the sharp scents of sawdust, healing herbs, and blood.

The cleanup was a symphony of controlled, sarcastic anarchy.

"Oi, dwarf-breath! That's my foot you're hammering!" a rogue yelped, yanking his boot from under a plank where Thrain was aggressively nailing down a new floorboard.
"Then move yer perishable parts!"Thrain grumbled back, not even looking up. "I'm rebuildin', not redecoratin'!"
Nearby,a mage with freshly regrown eyebrows was carefully using a minor levitation spell to hold a heavy beam in place while two brawlers argued about the correct angle to secure it.
"No,you moron, it goes flusher! Look at the scorch mark!"
"That's not a guide,that's where Hayate sneezed and breathed fire last week! You're using a bodily function as architectural reference!"
"I'm using what's available!It's called being resourceful!"

James, the chef, his broken arm now set and splinted, was directing a team from a stool, bellowing orders like a general. "You! Newbie! The mopping is not a suggestion! I will not have demon blood and our collective shame staining my floors! Well, more demon blood. And more shame. Just mop!"
A young adventurer,clutching a mop like a lifeline, squeaked, "Y-yes, Chef James!"

It was into this beautiful, chaotic mess that the first whispered question cut through, sharp and uncertain.

Leon, a quiet spellsword, stared at the spot where Kurohana had transformed, his brow furrowed. "What... what was that before?" he murmured, more to himself than anyone. "The... the fire. The horns. Her words..."

Ruka, a perpetually grinning kitsune, popped up from behind a half-repaired bar counter, a bottle of somehow-unbroken whiskey in each hand. "Ohh, that? What was that, really? Are we seeing the illusion when we were trapped in shadows? My cousin's an illusionist, you know, once made me think I'd married a goose for a whole week. Terrifying billing system."

Sakura, leaning against a wall as a healer checked the deep gash on her arm, shook her head, her voice firm despite her weariness. "No. It was no illusion. The pressure... the aura... it was real."

The words hung in the air for a heartbeat before Zeno, a logical-minded alchemist, voiced the terrifying conclusion everyone was dancing around. "It means... Kurohana really is the Demon Lord's heir."

A ripple of stunned silence spread out from their little group, quickly swallowing the rest of the hall's repair noise. Every adventurer who had been present for the fight froze, the memory of Kurohana's defiant, demonic form flashing in their minds. The returning members—the Crimson Fangs, the Celestia Pact, the others—could only look on in confusion, sensing a seismic shift they hadn't witnessed.

Scarlett, observing it all with her arms crossed, lazily leaned against a wall that was only slightly singed. She said nothing, her crimson eyes missing nothing.

And then, the dam broke. The guild hall erupted not in violence, but in a torrent of overlapping, chaotic, and utterly Sylax questions.

"It's not possible! Demons can't cross the barrier!"
"But that's ourKuro! The one who tried to put sugar in the stew because she thought it was salt!"
"Is shereally a demon lord heir? Like, 'command-legions-of-the-damned' heir or more of a 'figurehead-with-a-nice-castle' heir?"
"How did we NOT notice this?Does she have a secret lair in the basement? Was she using our best mugs for dark rituals?"
"Does this change everything?Do we have to start bowing? I'm not good at bowing. I pulled a muscle last time."
"Wait…so we've been babysitting the demon royalty this whole time and didn't even know? Are we supposed to curtsy or something?"
"Was she spying on us?"a younger rogue asked, his voice small.
"But…she protected us," a veteran shield-maiden countered immediately. "She stood between us and that... thing. So why hide it?"
"Do we still trust her?"someone else whispered, the question laced with pain.

The questions grew more absurd and frantic, a perfect reflection of their shock.
"Okay,so, they're unconscious… do we… like… feed them blood or… I dunno, souls? James, do we have any spare souls in the pantry?"
"Did we ever actually know her,or was this just… the illusion of family?"
"How long do you think she planned this before she joined us?Was her failed attempt at baking a ruse? It was a good ruse."
"Do you think she cares about us at all,or are we just pawns in some grand, fiery chess game?"
"How many other secrets is she keeping?Like, demon pet collection secrets? A hellhound named Fluffy?"
"Do we start calling her'your scorchy majesty' or stick with 'Kuro'?"
"Do you think she picks out her outfits in a cave full of fire and screams?I mean, her fashion sense is pretty dark."
"Does she sleep with one eye open for mortal assassins or just guild drama?"
"So…everything we shared… was just… filler dialogue for a story we weren't in?"

"Do we even deserve to be in her story?"
"Are we angry?Hurt? Or just impressed she fooled all of us?"

The tension spiked. A fist slammed on a wobbly table, making a tankard jump.

"ENOUGH!"

The voice belonged to Akira Kagami, the stoic tank of the Celestia Pact. His massive, armored form seemed to take up even more space as he glowered at the room. "Can someone just say what the hell is happening instead of blasting questions like we're in some cursed soap opera?!"

Isamu, looking uncharacteristically serious as he hovered near a pale Akira the receptionist, threw his hands up. "He's right! Why is everyone whispering? Just tell me what the heck is happening!"

Pino, from the Crimson Fangs, blinked. "Wait… what? Who's the demon heir?"

Hiro Amane, the wind elementalist, ran a hand through his silver hair. "Why is everyone staring at each other like they're about to betray the world? What's going on?"

Hayate grumbled, rubbing his sore head. "Can someone just, like… speak normally? I feel like I walked into a bad soap opera… or a demon prophecy I wasn't part of!"

Yudai, arms crossed, let out a long-suffering sigh. "Yeah, perfect. I survived goblins and lava, and now I have to survive the emotional apocalypse of our guild drama. Awesome."

Yuki, the gentle healer, looked pleadingly at Kael. "And why does everyone keep asking each other questions like they're detectives, but they won't answer us? Am I… missing some rule about not being told things?"

Finally, with a dramatic sigh that could wilt flowers, Scarlett pushed herself off the wall.

"Oi. Idiots."

The word, spoken at a normal volume, cut through the noise like a knife. Every head turned to her.

"The tsunami of questions. Stop it. Now, shut up," she commanded, her voice laced with her trademark grumpy exhaustion.

She strode to the center of the room, kicked a piece of broken chair out of her way, and climbed onto a large, scorched table that was miraculously still standing. She looked out over her guild—her messy, chaotic, wounded, and confused family.

Kael, his wise wolf-ears twitching, was the first to speak in the new silence. "Master. What is happening here?"

Scarlett sighed again, as if carrying the weight of the world. "Alright. Listen. First. Then you can have your emotional breakdowns or whatever." She took a deep, theatrical breath. "Kurohana Enji is the daughter of the Fire Demon Realm's Demon Lord, Shuen Akumao."

A fresh wave of murmurs started, but a sharp slash of her hand silenced it.

"It's a long story, so plug your ears if you've got a short attention span. When I, Shojin, and Kokan were in Zyvarra, a demon followed us. We caught him. His name is Yami. He told us Kuro was sick, dying from a human illness. He asked for help." A few guild members couldn't help but chuckle at the sheer absurdity of Scarlett playing field medic. She ignored them. "So we helped. And while we were there, she found out her father was killed. She was driven into shock and trauma. So, you tell me," she said, her gaze sweeping the room, "how could we leave her there? Alone? Surrounded by the very demons who murdered her father and now want her dead?"

Isamu crossed his arms. "A fair point, Master. But why did they kill a Demon Lord? And she is a demon. Isn't that her world? Her place, overall?"

Scarlett's gaze grew distant, a flicker of genuine respect in her crimson eyes. "Yeah. She is a demon. But not a full demon. She's a hybrid. Her mother was human." She let that sink in. "As for why Lord Shuen was killed... it was because of Sylphania. And because of Enji. He married a human. He fathered a hybrid heir. And he stood against all the other Demon Realms. He said he didn't want war. He wanted peace. He refused to fight Sylphania."

A profound, respectful silence fell over the hall. The image of a Demon Lord advocating for peace, dying for it, was not lost on these adventurers who lived and breathed conflict.

Scarlett's eyes were downcast, shadowed with a grief that felt ancient. "So they killed him. And now they want to capture his heir. Maybe to kill her. Maybe to make her a puppet. To extinguish the last ember of his dream."

Nods of understanding moved through the crowd. The 'why' was becoming painfully clear.

Yudai, ever practical, gestured with his chin towards the far corner, where Kagemaru lay tightly bound in Scarlett's own shadows, unconscious and broken. "And him?"

Scarlett's lip curled. "Him? That's Shadow Fang. The loyal attack dog of the Demon Lords and their King. Their best executioner."

Hiro's playful demeanor was gone. "So why is he here?"

"He's here," Scarlett said, her voice dropping to a deadly calm, "because they want Kurohana back."

Kael's tail gave a single, thoughtful swish. His intelligent eyes narrowed. "I understand why you brought her here, Master. A hybrid, grieving, seeking sanctuary... it aligns with our ways. But I am still confused. Even as a hybrid, she is still part demon. The barrier... it should have

rejected her. How did she cross?"

Scarlett offered a cryptic smirk. "She crossed... because of me."

Kael accepted this with a slow nod, understanding that some secrets, especially their Master's, were not for public dissection. His gaze then shifted to the captured Kagemaru. "And him? A full demon, and a powerful one. How did he cross the barrier?"

All traces of humor vanished from Scarlett's face. Her gaze, too, shifted to the bound assassin, and a deep, unsettling thoughtfulness took hold. "I don't know," she admitted, her voice low and serious. The hall hung on her every word. "I don't know how he crossed. Unless... unless there is someone else. Someone stronger than the barrier is on this earth. Maybe... a god."

Her whispered words were like a crack of thunder. The one who is destroying the barrier. The horrifying implication settled over everyone: the fading winds weren't an accident; they were an attack.

Scarlett shook her head, as if to clear it, and punched a fist into her palm, the sound echoing in the quiet hall. "But you know what? That's a problem for tomorrow. Here's something for today: Kurohana doesn't just want to hide. She wants to avenge her father. She wants to conquer the Fire Realm and claim her birthright."

This new revelation sparked another wave of murmurs.
"She's a demon heirand a danger to us all," a cautious voice argued from the back. "Inviting that kind of attention..."
"She fought for us!"

Sakura's voice rang out, clear and strong, cutting off the dissent. She stepped forward, her eyes blazing. "She revealed her identity, the very secret she was hiding to stay safe, only to save us! She put herself between that monster and this guild!" She raised a calloused hand into the air, her voice trembling not with fear, but with conviction. "So let's vote! All in favor of our little Kuro remaining a part of Sylax, of her staying with us, and of us helping her... raise your hand!"

Sakura closed her eyes, bracing for hesitation, for debate, for the painful split she feared was inevitable.

When she opened them, her breath caught in her throat.

The response was not a trickle. It was a tide. Every single hand in the guild hall was raised. Not slowly, not reluctantly, but immediately and decisively. Grizzled veterans, cheerful newbies, the Celestia Pact, the Crimson Fangs—everyone. Smiles, nods, and determined expressions met her tear-filled gaze.

An old, scarred adventurer patted her shoulder. "Hey. She's part of Sylax. We don't abandon our family. Ever."

"Besides,"another chimed in, "did you see her? She was magnificent! All fire and fury! She's one of us, through and through!"
"Oh,what, you think she only saved you, Sakura?" a third laughed. "We all saw it! She fought for Sylax!"

The hall erupted in cheers and supportive shouts for Kurohana. The tension shattered, replaced by the guild's familiar, chaotic warmth.

Scarlett, still sitting on the broken table, took a long, deep drink from a massive mug someone had handed her. A genuine, unguarded smile played on her lips as she watched her wild, beautiful, idiot family unite. She whispered to herself, so softly only the gods could hear, "That's my Sylax. That's my wildies."

Then, in her normal, booming yell: "OI! IDIOTS! WHO'S GOING TO FIX MY GUILD?! THIS ISN'T A SPECTATOR SPORT! GET BACK TO WORK!"

A collective chuckle went through the hall, and with renewed energy—and a fresh wave of insults and sarcastic remarks—they returned to the chaotic business of rebuilding.

Upstairs: The Vigil

While the guild debated her fate below, Kurohana Enji lay unconscious in her bed, trapped in a prison of feverish nightmares. She trembled, her brow slick with sweat, her fists clenching the sheets.

Kokan sat rigidly in a chair beside her, a bowl of cool water and a cloth on the bedside table. His usual stoic expression was fractured, replaced by a deep, gnawing guilt. With a clinical tenderness, he gently wiped the sweat from her forehead. Her hand, in her restless state, had found his and held it in a bone-white grip. He didn't pull away.

Why did I go on that quest? his mind raced, a torrent of self-recrimination. I left her here alone. I swore to protect her, and I was off collecting shells while she faced a monster. The memories he kept locked away surged forward: the sight of his own parents dying, the feeling of helplessness, his little sister's terrified cries as she was sent away, the cold isolation of his training... He had built walls of ice around his heart to survive. He couldn't bear to lose anyone else.

A single, traitorous tear escaped, tracing a clean path down his cheek. He leaned closer, his voice a desperate, whispered plea against the chaos of her dreams. "Please, Kuro. Don't die. Please wake up. I'm here. I'm not leaving."

In another room, Sora Hoshihana, the magical archer, was performing his duty with significantly less grace. He was perched on a stool next to Hina's bed, his chin in his hands, an expression of profound boredom on his face.

"Oi. Oi. Hina. Wake uuuup," he droned, lightly tapping her cheek with a finger. "I'm tired of sitting here. Master, why me? Couldn't you have sent Yuki? She's the healer! Or Hiro? He's annoying, he'd be perfect for this!"

Hina remained stubbornly unconscious. A mischievous glint entered Sora's eyes. "Well... if you're going to be napping on the job..." He giggled softly and began gathering sections of her dark hair, meticulously tying them into a series of ridiculous, lopsided pigtails and tiny, awkward braids. "There. A little battlefield beautification. You'll thank me later. Probably with a fireball, but still."

Across the hall, the scene was even less serene. Shojin had been tasked with watching over Mio. Believing that "keeping an eye" meant "prevent any and all stillness," he had decided to practice his balance. He stood on one foot in the center of the room, a tower of precariously stacked books on his head, a flowerpot balanced on each shoulder, and a quill pen perched on his nose.

Mio stirred. Her consciousness returned slowly, wrapped in the soft haze of healing magic and the distant, comforting chaos of the guild below. Am I... in heaven? she thought blearily. She tried to sit up, her body protesting with a dull ache.

The movement was Shojin's undoing. The tower of books, flowerpots, and quill went flying in every direction with a spectacular crash.

"YOU'RE AWAKE!"

Before Mio's vision could even clear, Shojin was right in her face. He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead, his own face inches from hers, his eyes wide with genuine, oblivious concern. "Are you okay? You feel really hot!"

Mio's brain short-circuited. The proximity, the warmth of his hand, the sheer, overwhelming intensity of him filled her entire world. A brilliant, crimson blush exploded across her face and traveled all the way to the tips of her ears. Her heart hammered against her ribs like a wild bird in a cage.

I-Is this... heaven? her mind stuttered.

Shojin, completely misreading her stunned silence and skyrocketing body temperature, frowned. "Whoa, you are burning up! Maybe you caught a demon fever or something!"

That was the final straw for Mio's overwhelmed system. With a strangled scream that was half-embarrassment, half-adrenaline, her fist shot out on pure, panicked instinct.

"AH!!"

The punch connected squarely with Shojin's chest, sending him stumbling backward, tripping over a fallen book, and tumbling straight out the open window with a yelp of surprise.

Mio sat bolt upright in bed, her entire body steaming. She stared at the empty space where he had been, then down at her own fist. Her head spun, the world tilting. "I... Is... i-its heaven..." she stammered, before her eyes rolled back and she collapsed onto her pillows, completely unconscious once more, a single, blissful, delirious word escaping her lips.

"...Sh-Shojin... sama…”

Chapter 47: Home Means No Questions Asked

Two days had passed since the Shadow Fang’s attack. The Sylax guild hall, through a Herculean effort fueled by insults, sarcasm, and a shocking amount of collective competence, was almost entirely repaired. The new wood of the floorboards shone brightly next to the older, scarred planks, and the smell of fresh paint and sawdust mingled with the familiar aroma of James’s cooking.

In a quiet corner, a drama was unfolding.

Hina’s eyes snapped open. The first thing she felt was a dull ache in her chest. The second was a strange, pulling sensation on her scalp. She sat up slowly, wincing, and her hands flew to her head. Her fingers encountered a bizarre landscape of lopsided pigtails and clumsily knotted braids.

A low, dangerous growl rumbled in her throat. "Sora," she whispered, her voice dripping with venom.

As if summoned by her rage, she saw a flash of a silver-blue ponytail disappearing behind a newly installed support beam. Sora Hoshihana, the Celestia Pact's archer, was currently employing advanced stealth tactics usually reserved for high-stakes missions to avoid one very angry, very inventive prodigy.

"OH, I SEE YOU, YOU SNEAKY, HAIR-VANDALIZING TWIT!" Hina yelled, scrambling out of bed with a wince. She grabbed a nearby, slightly-bent training dagger from a rack. "When I find you, I'm going to use your own bowstring to tie your ears together!"

A panicked whisper came from behind the beam. "It was artistic expression! You looked bland!"

"BLAND?!" Hina shrieked, giving chase. The guild members, used to such spectacles, merely stepped aside, some placing bets on how long Sora could survive.

Meanwhile, the main topic of concern was the still-unconscious girl upstairs.

"Hey, Isamu, any change?" a rogue called out as the charming captain passed by with a tray of drinks for the still-shaken receptionists.
Isamu’s usual smirk was absent."Nothing yet. Kokan hasn't left her side. The kid’s tougher than she looks, but two days is... a long time."
Pino,hopping from table to table, sighed dramatically. "I even tried telling her jokes through the door! The 'one about the goblin and the mimic chest' usually gets a groan, at least! Nothing!"

Hayate,his massive frame hunched over a bowl of soup, mumbled, "She has to be okay. Who else is going to lose at arm-wrestling to me so gracefully?"
A general murmur of agreement and worry passed through the hall.Despite the chaos, a palpable anxiety hung in the air. Their little firebrand was down, and Sylax felt unbalanced without her.

Upstairs, in the quiet of her room, Kurohana Enji swam up from the depths of a feverish, nightmare-ridden sleep. Her eyelids fluttered, heavy as lead, before slowly opening. The familiar wooden ceiling of her room in Sylax came into blurry focus.

She became aware of two presences. Kokan was seated in a chair beside her bed, his posture rigid, his stormy grey eyes fixed on her with an intensity that seemed to have worn grooves into his soul. Shojin was slumped in another chair, snoring softly, a line of drool tracing its way down his chin.

Seeing her stir, Kokan shot to his feet so fast the chair screeched back. In a movement completely devoid of his usual calculated grace, he leaned over and wrapped his arms around her in a tight, desperate hug.

Kurohana froze, her mind still foggy. "K-Kokan...?"

The hug broke as quickly as it began, but before she could process it, Shojin, awakened by the noise, let out a yelp of joy and launched himself at the bed, wrapping his arms around both of them in a classic, bone-crushing Shojin hug.

"YOU'RE AWAKE!" he yelled directly into her ear.

Kokan, his cheeks faintly tinged with pink, didn't pull away from the group hug. He just closed his eyes for a second, his voice a husky whisper. "Thank the gods you're okay."

Shojin, still squeezing, added, "Yeah! We were getting bored! Well, I was bored. Kokan was just being all broody and guilty. I was practicing my handstands!"

As the hug finally ended and the two boys sat on the edge of her bed, Kurohana's memory came rushing back in a terrifying flood. The demon. The battle. The shadows. Mio. Hina.

"I was in a battle... with a demon?" she asked, her voice trembling. "Everyone... is everyone okay? Mio... Hina... they were so hurt..."

Kokan placed a calming hand on her arm. "You don't have to worry. Everyone is fine. The healers have been working non-stop. Mio and Hina are already up and causing trouble."

Shojin, ever the dramatist, puffed out his chest. "And Granny defeated the demon! It was SO COOL! She was all whoosh and bam and he was all aaaargh! He didn't stand a chance!"

A wave of relief so powerful it made her dizzy washed over Kurohana. " Everything's okay..." she whispered, slumping back against her pillows. Then she looked down at herself, at the clean bandages wrapped around her arms and torso. The memories solidified, and with them came a cold, gripping fear. Her secret was out. The entire guild had seen her. What would they do? What would they think?

Shojin, completely oblivious to her internal panic, bounced on the bed. "Now let's go for dinner! You have to probably eat a whole cow! You've been asleep forever!"
Kokan nodded in firm agreement."Sustenance is critical for recovery."

Numbly, Kurohana agreed. The fear was a lead weight in her stomach, but she couldn't hide in this room forever. She had to face them.

As they walked downstairs, the familiar, comforting cacophony of the guild hall hit her ears. It was business as usual: an arm-wrestling match here, a heated debate about monster taxonomy there, the clatter of mugs and the booming laughter.

But the moment her foot touched the bottom step, the noise died.

It was like someone had cast a silence spell. Every head turned. Every conversation stopped mid-sentence. Dozens of eyes locked onto her.

Kurohana’s heart plummeted. No, she thought, her blood running cold. This is it. The rejection. The fear.

But her thought was shattered when a blur of motion shot towards her. Hina, her hair still in its ridiculous state, slammed into her, wrapping her in a fierce hug that made her bruised ribs protest.

"Finally, you're awake, you idiot," Hina whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Kurohana’s gaze found Mio across the room. The celestial swordswoman, who had been so grievously wounded, was standing, looking pale but determined. Their eyes met, and Mio rushed forward, wrapping her arms around both Kurohana and Hina.

"You're okay," Mio breathed, her voice soft but firm.

Then Sakura was there, her strong arms encircling all three of them. A tear escaped the veteran warrior's eye as she whispered, "You scared us. It's been two days."

The dam broke. The entire guild surged forward, surrounding her in a chaotic, overlapping wave of voices that was pure, undiluted Sylax.

“FINALLY. Sleeping Beauty decides to respawn.”
“We’re your guild,idiot. You scared the life out of us.”
“So uh…next time you wanna nap for 48 hours straight, maybe tell us first? We were about to use your bed for storage.”

“You’re family.That means you’re not allowed to die without permission. We have paperwork for that.”
A wide-eyed newbie whispered to another,"So are we hugging her or yelling at her or… what’s the protocol here?"
"Is this normal?Do people almost die often in this guild?"
“HELLO?You alive? Because we were about to file a complaint with destiny. The wait time was unacceptable.”
“Two days unconscious.Two. Days. We almost buried you, idiot. Hayate had already dug the hole!”
“Don’t get any ideas,I wasn’t crying. My eyes were… in beta testing. For a new emotional filtration system.”
“I was ready to give a tragic monologue at your funeral!I had props and everything!”
“DON’T EVER DO THAT AGAIN.I thought I lost my favorite sparring partner who actually loses to me on purpose!”
“You scared everyone else,not me. I’m built different. My heart is made of stone and sarcasm.”
“We kept your bed warm.Mostly by panicking. And crying. But that’s irrelevant to the warming process.”
“Blink once if your brain is working,blink twice if you’re still buffering. We need to know if we should restart you.”
“Congrats on waking up,queen of dramatic timing. You really know how to make an entrance. Or... an exit. And then an entrance again.”

An old, grizzled adventurer, one of the guild's founding members, stepped through the crowd. His back was straight, his eyes calm, his voice cutting through the noise like a warm knife.

“Child… power without trust is hollow. You must share your truth before it consumes you.”

The guild quieted, listening to their elder.

“You carry burdens heavier than steel. Let us be the hands that lift them.”

He gave a small, knowing smile.

“Also, drink water. You look like you fought destiny without hydration.”

Kurohana was still wrapped in the hug from Mio, Hina, and Sakura, utterly overwhelmed. The love and concern were so palpable it hurt. She found her voice, a small, broken whisper.
“But… I’m a demon heir. Then why…?”

The response was instantaneous and deafening.

“Because you’re ours. We don’t care what realm spawned you.”
“Because YOU FOUGHT FOR US,genius. Not for your demon kingdom. For us.”
“Girl,you think a fancy title is gonna scare us? We eat chaos for breakfast. With a side of existential dread.”

“Yeah yeah,demon heir, royalty, spooky aura… but you still scream when you see spiders. You’re one of us.”
“Pshh…demon heir, whatever. I’ve seen scarier things in our kitchen. James’s 'Surprise Stew' is a greater abomination than any hellspawn.”
“YOUR BLOODLINE IS IRRELEVANT,FOR OUR BONDS TRANSCEND REALMS!” a dramatic bard-type yelled, striking a pose.
“Also,you owe me three gold coins from our last card game. Royalty doesn't get out of debts.”
“It’s not like we were worried.Nope. Not at all. Totally calm,” said a warrior who was visibly trembling with relief.
“Demon heir or not,you sit at our table. You fight beside us. That’s enough.”
“Oh wow,look at her. Two days unconscious and suddenly dramatic. Just eat some stew and get back to work.”
“We don’t give a single pixel about your bloodline.”
“Next time you question why we care,I’m throwing a chair at you. A nice chair, but still.”
“Newsflash:family doesn’t check your species. They check your vibe. And your vibe is 'loyal idiot who sets things on fire.' We have a whole wing for that.”
“Congrats on the royal bloodline,but you still owe us 20 missed chores. Your demonic duties do not excuse you from latrine cleaning.”
“Demon heir,fairy heir, potato heir. You’re still OUR problem.”

The guild was in mid–chaos meltdown. Someone was shouting, someone else was openly crying. One newbie was indeed hiding behind a chair, utterly bewildered.

Then the old man stood up again. He looked at her—really looked at her—past the demon blood, past the fear, past the secret she had carried alone.

“Child… we know,” he said, and the room fell silent.

“We know what you are. We know where you come from.”

A few gasps. Someone dropped a mug, the clatter echoing in the sudden quiet.

He continued, steady and unshaken: “And none of it changes what you mean to us.” He stepped forward, resting a gnarled hand on her shoulder. “You fought for us when you didn’t have to. You bled for us when you could’ve walked away. Family is not forged by blood. It is forged by choice.”

The room was painfully silent, every ear straining.

“You chose us. And now we choose you.”

He gave that small, knowing smile old wise characters always keep hidden until the exact right moment.

“Demon heir or not, you are part of us. So don’t worry, little one. We’ll help you carry what comes next.”

The whole guild exhaled at once. Someone started crying again. Someone else muttered, “Great, now I’m emotional, thanks.”

And Kurohana… she finally broke. The last of her walls crumbled, and she started crying, great, heaving sobs of relief and gratitude. “Thank you… you all are the best…”

The guild’s response was, as always, a perfect blend of tenderness and absurdity.

A burly axeman crossed his arms, frowning but slightly softened: “Tch… don’t get all mushy on us. You fought for us, so… yeah, whatever, fine, cry.”
“Oi,oi, stop blubbering!” Pino yelled. "You’re making us look like softies in front of the newbies!"
Another added,rolling his eyes dramatically, "You know tears are mandatory in guild drama, right? Just kidding… stop crying!"
A woman from the Stormbreakers hugged her immediately:“Aww! You poor thing! You scared us all!”
A young knight fell to one knee theatrically:“You weep, but know that we… we are your shield and sword!”
Another placed a gentle hand on her shoulder:“There, there… we’ve got you. You’re not alone.”
Hayate tried to hide his worry behind grumbles:“Don’t cry like that again… geez, I nearly lost it seeing you like that.”
The old man gave a slight chuckle,shaking his head. “I’ve seen armies fall and dragons die, but tears… tears are powerful too. Let it out.”
Isamu threw an arm over her shoulder like a cloak.“No more tears, or I swear I’ll cry more than you!”
Yuki,the healer, was sobbing along quietly herself, holding Kurohana's hand. “We were so worried, don’t ever scare us like that again.”

Just then, James burst out of the kitchen, his face a thunderous scowl that belied the gleam in his eyes. “Finally awake, huh? Two days without food, and you’re crying? Priorities, girl. Energy first, tears later.”

He set down a tray piled high with hearty stew, roasted meat, and fresh bread that smelled like heaven itself. “Eat. You fought for us, now you fuel up. No heroics on an empty stomach.”

The guild erupted again.
“Look at that!She gets a feast just for crying! I demand snacks for myself next time I whine!”
Someone threw a piece of bread at her dramatically.“Catch it, heir princess! The royal carb-treat!”
“Finally,someone’s thinking sensibly! Eat before you pass out crying again.”
A bard gestured grandly to the food.“Behold! The banquet of life! Consume it, and rise stronger than your tears!”
Yuki was already helping her sit up,spooning some stew gently. “Eat, eat… you need it! We were worried sick!”

Another member picked up a small portion for themselves,muttering, “Hmph… I’m just sampling, don’t get used to this pampering.”

Kurohana, between sobs and sniffles, managed a watery smile. “Th-thank you… all of you… I… I didn’t expect… this…” She picked up a spoon and took a bite, the rich flavor grounding her.

James, grinning now, bellowed, “No crying while eating! That’s a rule! Tears in soup ruin the taste. Eat properly, or I’ll… I’ll make it spicier next time!”

The chaotic guild members all started talking at once again, a symphony of care disguised as insanity.
“You eat first!Don’t be shy!”
“Hurry up,or I’ll eat it all!”
“Yes,fuel up before more drama!”
“We told you,family takes care of you!”

As Kurohana was pulled towards a table, surrounded by her chaotic, wonderful, untamed family, she finally felt the last of her fear melt away. She was home.

Meanwhile, in the quiet of her office, Scarlett dipped a quill into a pot of ink. The sounds of the guild's joyful chaos were a comforting hum through the floorboards. She stared down at a piece of pristine parchment.

Lina, she began.

The winds whisper of a storm that is not natural. The barrier weakens not from age, but from a deliberate, hostile will. The evidence is no longer circumstantial. We have faced an agent of the other side, one who should never have been able to cross. The rules of our world are being rewritten, and we are perilously behind.

I am calling for a Grand Conclave. Summon every guild master. Every lord and lady with the power to raise a sword or cast a spell. And it is imperative that you summon Karatos. The Oni’s strength and wisdom are needed now more than ever. The founders must stand together once more.

There is much we must discuss face-to-face. The threat is greater than we imagined.

She signed it with a simple, looping S.

She didn't mention Kurohana. The girl's secret was Sylax's to protect now. The conclave was for the larger war, the one brewing in the shadows, threatening to tear down the world her sister had died to create. As the ink dried, Scarlett’s crimson eyes glowed with a grim, ancient light. The time for hiding was over. The time to fight was coming.

Chapter 48: The Scarlet Message

The door to Scarlett's office clicked shut, muting the familiar, chaotic symphony of her guild. The silence that remained was heavy, thick with the ghosts of the words she had just committed to parchment. The scent of drying ink was a stark contrast to the usual aromas of beer and sawdust that clung to the air outside.

She had sent the letter to Lina last night. A simple act that felt like rolling a stone from a mountainside, knowing it would start an avalanche. Now, there was nothing to do but wait, and the weight of millennia felt heavier than any dragon's hoard.

She walked to the large, stained-glass window of her office, its panes depicting not saints or kings, but a chaotic, beautiful mosaic of intertwined races—a testament to the guild she had built. Leaning her forehead against the cool glass, she closed her crimson eyes, and the present fell away.

(Memory: A Hidden Grove, Ten Thousand Years Ago)
The air was clean, untouched by war or industry. The only sounds were the whisper of leaves and the gentle hum of a divine barrier, a shimmering veil that was both their sanctuary and their cage.

Two girls lay in the grass. One, with hair like spring leaves and emerald eyes full of dreams, stared at the sky. The other, her twin, with hair as dark as a raven's wing and eyes the color of fresh blood, chewed on a blade of grass, her restlessness a palpable energy.

"Hey, Sylph," Scarlett said, her voice younger, lighter, unburdened by the weight of legends. "What's your dream?"

Sylph's smile was soft, a little sad. "I want peace. A land where no war exists. Where no one hates hybrids like us, where no one looks at us with suspicion. A place where no one has to lose their mother… like we did." Her voice cracked, but she forced a brighter tone. "If not for Aunt Fujin, we wouldn't even be alive. We owe her everything."

She turned, her emerald gaze meeting her sister's fiery one. "What about you, Scarlett? What's your dream?"

Scarlett's grin was a flash of white in the twilight, though a tremor of vulnerability ran beneath it. "I want freedom, Sylph. To break this invisible cage and see the world! To hunt, to fight, to laugh with strangers. To live without Father asking us a hundred questions every time we step outside. I want adventure. I want the unknown."

Sylph's eyes glowed, a idea sparking within them. "Then… why not make our dreams one?"

Scarlett raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

“We’ll build a kingdom together,” Sylph declared, her voice gaining strength. “A land of peace and love—”

“—And of adventure and freedom,” Scarlett finished, her smirk widening into a genuine, hopeful smile.

Their laughter, bright and unburdened, echoed under the starlit sky, a sound of pure, untamed joy. But it faded too soon, replaced by a nervous silence.

Sylph bit her lip. “We’ll have to tell Father.”

Scarlett groaned, flopping back onto the grass. “Convincing him is harder than fighting a dragon.”

The memory was a shard of glass in her heart. So much hope. So much light. Scarlett’s knuckles were white where she gripped the windowsill. She could almost smell the venison from that fateful dinner, see the heartbreak in her father’s eyes when they told him they were leaving.

“You are my little princesses. Always.”

Kaelen’s voice, thick with tears he would never shed in front of them, echoed down the corridors of time. He had let them go. He had supported their dream, even as it broke his own heart. The greatest act of love she had ever known.

Her gaze, hazy with the past, refocused on the present, drifting down to the training yard below.

Chaos reigned, as it always did. Shojin was a whirlwind of fire and noise, attempting a new, wildly impractical variation of his Phoenix Blaze that involved three consecutive spins and a yell of "INFERNO TWISTER!" He promptly lost control, spiraled into a cartwheel, and crashed headfirst into a water trough, sending a plume of steam hissing into the air.

Kokan, with a long-suffering sigh that was audible even from her window, used a precise flick of his water magic to right the trough. His movements were fluid, controlled, a stark contrast to Shojin’s beautiful chaos. He was correcting Kurohana’s stance, his voice too low to hear, but his gestures were patient, guiding her through a controlled burst of demonic fire that danced in her palm like a trapped star.

A painful, fond smile touched Scarlett’s lips. Her headaches. Her wildies.

Her eyes lingered on Kokan—on the sharp, handsome features that were a living portrait of two ghosts. The calm, analytical intelligence in his stormy grey eyes was all Lydia. The innate, powerful grace in his swordsmanship, the set of his shoulders, was pure Zohan.

“So that was your wish, my old friends?” she whispered into the silent office, the words meant for ears long turned to dust. “You wanted your grandson to find freedom with me. The untamed one.”

A wave of protectiveness, fierce and primal, washed over her. She had failed to protect so many. Sylph. Rex. Her parents. Zohan and Lydia themselves, in the end. She would not fail their blood. She would not fail any of them.

A Quiet Town Square, Elsewhere in Sylphania

The town was peaceful, nestled in the foothills of the Serpent's Spine mountains. Children’s laughter, not the clash of steel, filled the air. On a weathered stone bench, a figure of immense power sat, so still he seemed a part of the landscape itself.

Karatos, the Oni warrior, one of the thirteen founders, had skin the color of twilight and two powerful, curved horns rising from his brow. His golden eyes, which had witnessed the birth and death of empires, were currently crinkled with amusement.

Two little girls, no older than six, were taking turns gently poking his horns, their eyes wide with fascination.

“Are they real?” one whispered.

“Can you take them off?” asked the other.

Karatos let out a low, rumbling chuckle, a sound like distant thunder. “They are quite real, little ones. And no, they do not come off.”

The memory surfaced, unbidden and vivid. Two different girls, a lifetime ago. One with green hair and a gentle smile, the other with crimson eyes and a daring grin, their fingers just as curious, in a tavern at the edge of the known world.

“Whoa! What’s that on your head?” a younger, brasher Scarlett had asked.

“...My horns. Don’t touch—” the younger Karatos had grumbled.

Too late. Both sisters had leaned over, poking them with identical fascination.

“We’ve never seen a human with horns!”

“I’m not human,” he’d said flatly. “I’m Oni. Name’s Karatos.”

A shadow fell over him, pulling him from the past. A light elf woman, her hair the color of moonlight and her robes simple yet elegant, stood before him. Age had not diminished her grace; it had refined it, carving lines of wisdom and sorrow around her eyes. Lina.

“Oi, you great lug. Still letting children use you as a climbing post, I see,” she said, her voice a melodic tease that held an undercurrent of immense fatigue.

Karatos's golden eyes met hers. "Some things never change, Lina. It is… peaceful."

Lina's smile was soft but didn't reach her eyes. She held out a rolled parchment. "Peaceful is a fleeting dream, my old friend. I received this last night. By a wind-messenger. A method I haven't seen in millennia."

Karatos took the scroll. His large, calloused fingers were surprisingly delicate as he unrolled it. He read the words slowly, his expression unchanging, but the air around him seemed to grow denser, heavier.

Lina,

The winds whisper of a storm that is not natural. The barrier weakens not from age, but from a deliberate, hostile will. The evidence is no longer circumstantial. We have faced an agent of the other side, one who should never have been able to cross. The rules of our world are being rewritten, and we are perilously behind.

I am calling for a Grand Conclave. Summon every guild master. Every lord and lady with the power to raise a sword or cast a spell. And it is imperative that you summon Karatos. The Oni's strength and wisdom are needed now more than ever. The founders must stand together once more.

There is much we must discuss face-to-face. The threat is greater than we imagined.

S

His gaze lingered on the signature. Not a name. Just a single, looping, defiant 'S'. A smirk that was all sharp edges and hidden pain. A ghost from a legend.

He let out another chuckle, this one deeper, laced with a strange cocktail of nostalgia and grim anticipation. "So. She wants to meet me."

Lina sat beside him, the bench groaning under their combined, ancient weight. "Oh, come on, Karatos. Don't pretend you're not interested. Your 'wild Scarlett' is calling. It's been a long time."

"Millennia," Karatos corrected, his voice a low rumble. He looked at the parchment again, his thumb tracing the elegant 'S'. "I am very eager to see what trouble she has gotten herself into this time."

Lina's playful demeanor faded, replaced by the grim reality of the message. "But don't forget the letter, Karatos. This isn't a social call. Read it. Really read it."

His golden eyes scanned the words again, and the amusement drained from his face, replaced by a warrior's cold analysis. "An agent of the other side… who crossed the barrier." He looked at Lina, his expression grave. "She speaks of a threat."

“Yeah, yeah, a threat,” Lina replied, waving a hand with forced nonchalance that fooled neither of them. “The usual ‘end of the world’ business. It’s been a while, keeps us on our toes.”

Karatos rolled the parchment back up, his movements deliberate. “So, the Grand Conclave,” he said. “You have set it in motion?”

Lina nodded, her gaze turning toward the distant capital. “I already sent the orders the moment I read her letter. Riders and mages are spreading the message to every corner of Sylphania. Every guild master, every lord with a title and a sword, will be summoned. The capital will be bursting at the seams.”

A long silence stretched between them, filled with the weight of ten thousand years. The laughter of the children seemed very far away.

“So,” Karatos said softly, breaking the quiet. “The last remnants of the Covenant Bond are to meet again. After all this time.”

Lina looked at him, her ancient eyes full of a sadness that had no end. “Yeah,” she whispered. “Because we are the only three left.”

Karatos was quiet for a moment, then asked, “What of the boy? Lydia and Zohan’s descendant? Kokan.”

A genuine, warm smile finally broke through Lina’s solemnity. “He is under Scarlett’s care. And from what my sources tell me, he is thriving. She has… another one, too. A ball of fire and noise named Shojin. And… well, a third. A more complicated case.”

Karatos raised a single, bushy eyebrow. “Oh?”

“A story for another time,” Lina said, standing up. “We have a conclave to prepare for. And you, my friend, have a reunion to attend.”

Karatos remained on the bench for a long time after Lina left, the parchment held loosely in his hand. The two little girls had run off to another game. The sun dipped lower, painting the sky in shades of orange and purple, the same colors that had graced the sky on the day Sylphania was founded.

The last three. Himself, the unyielding Oni. Lina, the graceful Archer. And Scarlett… the untamed heart of them all. The world was once again tilting on the edge of a blade, and the winds were whispering of a storm only they could weather.

(Back in Sylax)

The sun began to set, casting long, dramatic shadows across the training yard. The chaos had settled into exhausted, companionable quiet. Shojin was trying to wring water out of his tunic, Kurohana was practicing small, controlled flames on her fingertips, and Kokan was watching over them both, a silent, steady sentinel.

Scarlett watched them from her window. The memory of her sister's light, the echo of her father's love, the grim resolve in Karatos's imagined expression—it all coalesced into a single, burning point in her chest.

This was what she fought for. Not for a kingdom, not for a legend, but for this messy, chaotic, beautiful life. For the chance for these children to have their own adventures, their own dreams, without the world ending around them.

Her crimson eyes, old and tired and full of a fire that would never be extinguished, hardened with resolve. She had run from her legacy once, choosing the freedom of the wild over the gilded cage of a throne.

But some cages were not made of gold and silk. Some were made of failing magic and encroaching shadows. And to protect the freedom she cherished, she would have to step back into the legend she had abandoned.

She looked out at the darkening sky, towards the capital where the conclave would gather, and whispered a vow to the gathering night.

"They will not take this from us, Sylph. I will not let them. No matter what forgotten god or demon king tries to tear it down." She placed a hand on the cool glass, her reflection a ghost overlaid on the vibrant life of her guild. "This time, I'm not running. This time, we fight."

Chapter 49: The Conclave Awaits

The Sylax mess hall was a beautiful disaster zone, a symphony of clattering plates, yelling, and the occasional burst of minor, contained magic that made the cutlery vibrate. At the epicenter of it all, Scarlett was engaged in her morning ritual: using a fork to expertly deflect bits of egg and bacon that Shojin kept sending airborne with his animated retelling of the "Giant Turnip Terry" quest.

"—and then BAM! Kurohana singed its leafy top and it looked so offended! And then Kokan—oof!" A piece of toast flew from his plate. Scarlett, without looking, snagged it out of the air with her fork and took a bite.

"Chew with your mouth closed, fire-brat. It's a more productive use of your energy," she droned, her mind only half on the chaos. The other half was on a parchment sent with divine wind, and the silent countdown in her head. Two days.

Suddenly, the main doors swung open. A knight clad in the polished, formal armor of the Sylphania capital guard stood framed in the doorway. He held himself with rigid formality, a stark contrast to the beautiful bedlam before him.

THWACK!

A stray mug of beer, launched from a distant arm-wrestling match, connected perfectly with the side of his gleaming helmet, sending a frothy cascade down his pauldrons.

The hall's noise dipped for a half-second. A dwarf from the Ironclaw Battalion peered over. "Oi! Sorry there, mate! Wild swing!"

The knight, named Noa Tsukikame, stood frozen, beer dripping from his chin. He cleared his throat, a loud, forced "AHEM! AHEM!" that was utterly swallowed by the guild's resuming cacophony. No one even glanced his way. His eye twitched in frustration. His gaze scanned the room, desperately seeking authority, and landed on the only person who seemed to be exuding a semblance of it, despite her lazy posture and food-laden fork—a woman with crimson eyes and a grumpy expression, surrounded by three teenagers.

He marched over, his armor clanking with every stiff step. "You," he said, his voice tight. "Are you the guild master here?"

Scarlett didn't look up from her plate. Shojin, however, bounced in his seat. "Yeah yeah! She is! That's Granny—I mean, Master Scarlett!"

Noa sighed inwardly. This was the master of this... madhouse? "I must say, I don't understand why the lowest-ranked guild is even being summoned," he muttered, more to himself than anyone.

Finally, Scarlett looked at him, a slow, sarcastic smirk spreading across her face. "Becauuuse," she drawled, "we're untamed. It's in the name. Try to keep up."

Noa sighed in defeat and handed her a scroll sealed with the official crest of the Sylphania council. "This is your formal summons. The Grand Conclave begins in two days' time."

Scarlett took the scroll, her grin widening. Right on schedule. She broke the seal and skimmed the formal language. Noa murmured under his breath, "Why, oh why, did I have to be the one tasked with escorting them? What did I do to deserve—"

His lament was cut short as Scarlett abruptly stood and hopped onto her table, stomping her boot for attention. "OI! IDIOTS! EYES ON ME!"

The effect was instantaneous. The roaring chaos snuffed out into dead, expectant silence in under three seconds. Noa stared, his jaw slightly agape.

"Yeah, Master?" a unified voice called back.

Scarlett waved the scroll. "We've been summoned! The Grand Conclave is upon us!" A knowing murmur rippled through the hall; they all knew what this truly meant. "Now listen up! When I call your name, you stand! Understood?"

A unified "YES, MASTER!" shook the rafters.

"My three headaches! Shojin! Kokan! Kurohana!" The three apprentices shot to their feet, Shojin puffing his chest out, Kokan standing with calm readiness, Enji with determined nervousness.

"Crimson Fangs of Sylax! Pino! Hayate! Yudai! Isamu!" The famed team stood, Isamu striking a casual pose.

"Sora of the Celestia Pact!" Sora popped up with a mischievous grin and a two-fingered salute.

"And Sakura, healer and warrior of the Ironclaw!" The veteran shield-maiden stood, a confident smirk on her face.

"You're all coming with me to the Conclave," Scarlett declared. "Now, go pack your bags! We leave in ten minutes!" A chaotic scramble ensued as the named members shot towards the stairs.

Scarlett turned back to the rest of her guild, who were watching with proud, fierce smiles. "OI! THE REST OF YOU WILDIES! I'M COUNTING ON YOU! SYLAX IS YOURS TO PROTECT WHILE I'M GONE!"

The response was a deafening roar of approval.
"You can leave it to us,Master!"

"We'll keep the fires burning and the beer cold!"
"Try not to causetoo much property damage at the capital!"

Scarlett hopped down, grabbed two full mugs of beer from a passing tray, and shoved one into Noa's hand. He stared at it, bewildered.

"It's not poisoned," she said flatly, before draining half of hers in one go.

Hesitantly, Noa took a sip. It was... surprisingly good. He found himself slumping into a vacant chair, his rigid posture forgotten as he simply observed. He saw adventurers laughing, clapping each other on the back, arguing good-naturedly about who would win the upcoming pie-eating contest. It was chaotic, it was loud, it was... alive. It was nothing like the sterile, hierarchical guilds he was used to in the capital. It's the lowest rank... but it feels more like a family than any guild I've ever seen, he thought.

Scarlett's voice broke his reverie. "Oi. Knight boy."

"I am not a 'knight boy'!" he protested, standing up straight again. "I am Noa Tsukikame of the Royal—"

"Whatever," Scarlett waved a hand dismissively. "You said you're here to escort us. That's the order, right? Escort the guild to the Conclave after delivering the invite?"

Noa sighed, the weight of his destiny settling back on his shoulders. "Yes. And it seems I am... stuck with you. So, I will accompany you."

"Good. Oh, Noa," Scarlett said, as her selected team thundered back down the stairs, bags in tow. "You forgot something."

Noa looked at her, curious. "Forgot what?"

Scarlett's smirk returned, fierce and proud. "You forget... we're also called the Untamed Guild of Sylphania."

The team assembled before her: Shojin vibrating with energy, Kokan calm, Kurohana determined, Sora looking mischievous, Sakura steady, and the Crimson Fangs ready for anything.

"Crimson Fangs," Scarlett began, her tone shifting to one of command. "I have a task for you on this journey."

The four of them straightened up. "Okay, Master!"

"Good. You four," she said, pointing at them, "will carry the demon."

They all stared, then their eyes flicked to Kurohana. THWACK! Scarlett's mug connected with Isamu's head. "IDIOTS! Not her! The other one! Shadow Fang!"

Pino blinked. "Oh! Right! He's still all wrapped up in your shadow-stuff in the basement! He's still pretty injured, isn't he? Is there nothing we can do for him?"

Scarlett's mind flashed back to the previous night, down in the cold storage cellar. She had examined the unconscious Kagemaru. His demonic regeneration was slow, hampered by her divine shadows. And around his neck, she had found it: a simple silver pendant, cold to the touch, humming with a familiar, yet alien, divine energy. She had taken it, slipping it into her pocket. A key. Forged by the same power eroding the barrier.

"Nothing we can do," Scarlett said flatly in the present. "Hayate, Yudai, go get him."

The two large men nodded and descended into the basement, returning a moment later carrying the cocooned, unconscious form of Kagemaru, bound tightly in writhing shadows.

Noa's eyes nearly bulged out of his head. "A DEMON?!" he yelped, taking a step back and reaching for his sword.

Scarlett patted his armored back, making him jump. "Yeah. Don't worry, he's house-trained. Mostly." She looked over her team: Hayate and Yudai carrying the demon, Pino, Sakura, Sora, Enji, Kokan, Shojin. She did a quick headcount. "We're missing someone... OI! ROMEO!"

Everyone looked towards the reception desk. Isamu was leaning against it, deep in conversation with a flustered Akira. "—and so I told the hydra, 'my love, your breath is fouler than a troll's laundry day,' and it was so offended it—"

A ceramic mug (not Scarlett's good one) flew across the room and shattered against the wall beside his head.

"OI, JULIET! WE'RE LEAVING!" Scarlett yelled.

Akira yelped, yanked her hand back from Isamu's, and began stamping forms with furious, red-cheeked intensity. Isamu sighed dramatically. "Oh, Master, must you interrupt the muse? I'm coming!"

And so, the journey began. Noa could scarcely believe the procession. Scarlett led the way, walking with a lazy saunter that somehow covered ground quickly. Behind her walked Noa and Sakura. Behind them were Shojin, Kokan, Kurohana, and Sora. And bringing up the rear were the Crimson Fangs, carrying the shadow-wrapped demon like a piece of ominous furniture.

Noa was in a state of perpetual shock and disbelief. Shojin's energy was boundless. "WE'RE GOING TO THE CAPITAL!YES! I WAS THERE ONCE! IT'S SO BIG AND SHINY! MAYBE I'LL SEE THE ROYAL GUARDS AND SHOW THEM MY PHOENIX BLAZE!" "Please do not demonstrate incendiary techniques near the royal guard,"Kokan stated dryly. At one point,Shojin tried to practice his "Fire Fist" on a suspicious-looking tree stump. The

stump, which was in fact a slumbering (and now very angry) Treant, stood up and chased him for a full five minutes before Sakura calmly stepped in and bonked it on the head with her shield, convincing it to go back to sleep.

Kokan spent the time analyzing everything. "The flora here is consistent with the central Sylphanian basin. The soil composition suggests a high mineral content, which would explain the prevalence of earth-elemental sprites noted in the region's bestiary." Kurohana listened, fascinated, while Sora tried to balance a pebble on Kokan's head without him noticing.

The Crimson Fangs had their own challenges.
"Pino,stop poking him," Hayate grumbled, shifting the weight of the demonic bundle.
"I'm just checking if he's still breathing!What if he turns into smoke?"
"He's not a ghost,he's a demon," Yudai signed, his expression long-suffering.
Isamu,walking backwards, regaled them with stories. "And so I told the Queen of the Fae, 'my dear, your wings are like fractured moonlight,' and she was so moved she offered me a kingdom! But I said, 'alas, my heart belongs to Sylax and a certain fiery receptionist—OW!'" He walked straight into a tree.

Through it all, Noa's head swiveled, trying to take in the chaos. Sakura, walking beside him, chuckled softly.

"Hey. Don't worry. This is normal for us," she said, her voice warm and comforting.

Noa blushed, grateful for her presence. Finally, he thought, a sane, normal, gentle person in this guild. "I'm not worried," he managed. "I'm just... surprised. This is the lowest-ranked guild, but no one here seems to care."

Sakura giggled. "Oh, about that? Rank doesn't matter to us. Because we are Sylax." She gave him a bright, reassuring smile.

"But—" he started.

She cut him off gently. "We are the untamed soul of Sylphania, Noa. We don't fit in your charts and rankings."

The two days passed in a blur of similar incidents. Shojin tried to fish using a small fireball as bait and accidentally boiled a small section of a creek. Sora convinced a group of traveling merchants that Hayate was a lost prince from a kingdom of friendly giants. Through it all, Noa's initial shock slowly melted into a bewildered fascination.

On the evening of the second day, the magnificent spires of the Sylphania capital came into view. As they approached the main gate, Scarlett called a halt.

"OI! IDIOTS! LINE UP!"

Everyone, except Noa, immediately fell into a ragged, chaotic, but somehow effective line.

"Alright, listen up!" Scarlett barked. "From here, we split into two groups!" A chorus of "OKAY, MASTER!" replied.

"Group one! You're on demon-duty! Hayate, Yudai, Isamu, Pino! You four will take this demon dog to the high-security prison. Get him processed, arrested, and you are to keep an eye on him until I say otherwise. I'm counting on you, Crimson Fangs!"

The four of them nodded, their expressions turning serious. "You can count on us, Master."

Scarlett then looked at the remaining members: Sakura, Sora, Shojin, Kokan, and Kurohana. "The rest of you... you're with me. We're going to the Conclave."

The chapter ends with the team splitting in two under the towering gates of the capital, one group heading towards the dungeons with a world-ending secret, and the other towards the political lion's den, ready to face the gathered powers of Sylphania. The real game was about to begin.

Chapter 50: Reunion at the Conclave

The Grand Conclave Hall was a monument to polished ego and manufactured power. Sunlight, filtered through towering stained-glass windows depicting the heroic (and highly sanitized) deeds of the Covenant Order, fell upon a sea of guild masters. They stood in cliques of polished armor and elegant, impractical robes, their guild insignias—Celestial Vanguard, Adamant Aegis, Stormbringer—gleaming. More importantly, their rankings—1st, 5th, 12th—were displayed on their pauldrons like holy scripture.

And then, the doors creaked open, and Sylax walked in.

It was like a pack of wild wolves had wandered into a poodle show. Scarlett led the way, her lazy saunter a direct insult to the hall's rigid formality, her crimson coat a splash of fresh blood on a marble floor. Behind her, Noa the knight looked like he was marching to his own execution. Sora scanned the room with a mischievous glint, Sakura stood with veteran calm, while Shojin, Kokan, and Kurohana brought up the rear—a trio of youthful intensity trying to mimic their master's nonchalance and failing spectacularly.

A wave of whispers, sharp and condescending, rippled through the opulent crowd.

"Is that… Sylax? The Untamed Guild?"
"What in the Founder's name arethey doing here? Did they get lost on a trash-collection quest?"
"Look at them.They look like they just wrestled a troll in a mud pit and lost."
"Probably did.Disgraceful. This is a conclave for the elite, not gutter-rats."

Scarlett's ear twitched, but her smirk was unshakable. "Ears up, headaches," she murmured without turning. "The buzzing flies are out in force today. Just noise."

They carved out a space to stand, a deliberate act of defiance that drew more scowls. As they settled, a lithe figure materialized from the shadows beside them. It was Lunaris, Master of the 30th-ranked Silent Daggers, his silver hair perfect, his green robes immaculate. He didn't even glance at Scarlett; his avaricious eyes were fixed on her apprentices, particularly Kokan.

"A waste of true talent," Lunaris said, his voice a silken, condescending whisper aimed directly at Kokan. "You, boy. The blood of legends, rotting in that… place." He gestured dismissively at Scarlett. "Join the Silent Daggers. Our resources are limitless. Our reputation, pristine. We can offer you a future, not a punchline."

Kokan didn't turn his head. His response was a flat, cold monotone. "I belong to Sylax."

Lunaris's smile was a razor cut. "A foolish sentiment. You'll die penniless and unknown with her." He melted back into the crowd, joining a group of other high-ranked masters who chuckled, their insults now barely concealed.

“Why won’t they just shut up?!” Shojin hissed, his hands clenching into white-knuckled fists, his face flushing with anger.

Sakura’s hand landed firmly on his shoulder. “Patience, Shojin. Barking dogs rarely bite. And we are not here to fight them.” Her calm was a soothing balm, but the tension in the Sylax group was a live wire.

The whispers grew louder, more brazen.
“Ayo,look, the trash guild showed up! Must be lost.”
“Imagine being that weak and still having the audacity to breathe our air.”
“Their gear looks like it came from a goblin’s clearance sale.”
“Why is the legendary blood wasting his time with them?It’s embarrassing.”

Kokan’s jaw tightened. He felt the weight of every dismissive glance, every hissed insult aimed at his guild, his family. Kurohana, beside him, flinched at the venom, her demonic senses overwhelmed by the concentrated disdain. “I don’t understand… why do they hate us so much?” she whispered, her voice trembling with a mixture of confusion and rising anger.

Kokan leaned close, his voice for her alone. “They see rank, not strength. They see order, not family. They fear what they can’t categorize.” His own anger was a cold, hard knot in his stomach, but he kept it locked down.

Scarlett, observing it all, let out a soft, almost inaudible sigh. Her gaze swept over her team, seeing the controlled rage in their postures. She gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod of pride. They were holding fast.

Suddenly, the main doors at the front of the hall swung open with a resonant boom that demanded silence. The Guild Board, a council of seven elderly and severe-looking individuals, filed in and took their seats on a raised dais. The crowd fell silent, all attention shifting to the authority figures.

“Silence,” the central figure, an ancient dwarf with a beard woven with gems and steel, intoned. His voice, though quiet, carried absolute authority.

Another board member, a stern-faced human woman, stood. “You have all been summoned today because of them.” She gestured towards the large, ornate door behind the dais. “The fading of the barrier is not a natural decay. It is an attack.”

Before the gasps could fully form, the door creaked open again. Two figures emerged, and the air in the hall grew thick with awe.

One was Lina, the Light Elf Archer of the Covenant Order, her hair like moonlight, her presence both graceful and immense. Beside her was a mountain of a man—Karatos, the Oni warrior. His skin was the color of twilight, his two powerful horns curving from his brow, and his golden eyes held the weight of millennia. The entire Guild Board bowed their heads in deep respect.

A deafening wave of murmurs erupted.
“Lady Lina!Lord Karatos!”
“The founders themselves!”
“Why are they here?”

Karatos’s ancient eyes scanned the crowd, a predator taking stock of his environment. His gaze swept over the top-ranked masters, the pompous lords, and then… it stopped. It landed squarely on Scarlett.

A slow, genuine smile spread across his face, cracking his stoic demeanor. He took a half-step forward, his voice a low, rumbling thunderclap of joy that cut through the noise.

“Oi. Scarlett.”

Every head in the room swiveled to stare at the master of the lowest-ranked guild. The whispers died in a collective intake of breath.

Scarlett, looking utterly bored, raised a single eyebrow. “Yes?”

Karatos’s smirk widened. “It’s been a long time, no see, Wild Scara.”

A beat of stunned silence. Then, the hall exploded in frantic whispers. “He knows her name?!” “How?! Why is he talking to her like that?!” “She’s unhinged! She should be showing respect!”

Scarlett placed her hands on her hips, her own smirk mirroring his. Their eyes locked, a silent, decade-spanning conversation passing between them in an instant. “Yeah. Long time no see.” Her gaze did a quick, deliberate scan of him from head to toe. “I thought you’d be older. You know, needing a stick to walk by now.”

Karatos threw his head back and laughed, a sound so full and rich it seemed to shake the very foundations of the hall. “Oh, absolutely wrong, my dear. I could still defeat armies before breakfast.” He jumped down from the dais with a ground-shaking thud that made several masters yelp, landing directly in front of the Sylax group.

He completely ignored the sputtering outrage around him. His gaze moved over Sora, Sakura, and then Shojin, who was vibrating with excitement.

“Ohh, so you’re the adventurers of Sylax,” Karatos boomed.

Sakura bowed respectfully. “Yes, Lord Karatos.”

Shojin, unable to contain himself, zipped forward. “So you’re from the Covenant Bond! The founders of Sylphania!” His eyes widened as he stared at the horns. “Whoa! You’re an Oni!” And then, in a move that made Noa gasp in horror, Shojin reached out and poked one of Karatos’s horns.

The entire hall froze.

Karatos blinked. And then, he and Scarlett burst into simultaneous, heartfelt laughter. The memory of two other curious girls poking his horns a lifetime ago was vivid in both their minds. Lina, watching from the balcony, smiled softly.

“Some things never change,” Karatos rumbled, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

His gaze then fell on Kokan, and the laughter softened into something more profound, more respectful. He saw Lydia’s calm intelligence in his stormy eyes, Zohan’s noble bearing in his posture. “Ohh, hey there, lil’ Kokan. How are you doing?”

“I am doing great, Master Karatos,” Kokan replied, a rare, genuine smile touching his own lips.

Finally, Karatos’s eyes flicked to Kurohana. A flicker of something—recognition, curiosity—passed through his golden gaze. He felt the faint, carefully masked ember of demonic fire, but he said nothing, simply giving her a brief, acknowledging nod before turning his attention back to the whole group.

THWIP! THWIP!

Two arrows of pure light embedded themselves in the floor between Karatos and Scarlett, humming with energy.

“Meeting first, nostalgic reunion later, you two,” Lina called down from the balcony, her voice melodic but firm.

The spell was broken. Scarlett and Karatos gave each other a final, knowing look and a simultaneous, serious nod.

Lina addressed the hall, her voice effortlessly capturing every ounce of attention. “Today, we are united because the barrier is not fading. It is being weakened. Deliberately.”

She gestured to Scarlett. “Last week, Sylax was attacked.”

The whispers began again, laced with disbelief. “A demon? Impossible!”
“She’s lying!No demon can cross!”

Karatos turned to Scarlett, his expression grave. “Is this true?”

“I know it defies logic,” Scarlett replied, her voice cutting through the doubt. “But it happened. A demon known as Shadow Fang infiltrated our guild. He crossed the barrier because someone—or something—with divine power is making it possible. We are not facing a natural decay. We are facing a war with a divine enemy.”

Pandemonium. “Divine?!” “That’s blasphemy!” “She’s mad!”

Lina waited for the noise to subside. “Our enemy has access to power we cannot yet comprehend. We must prepare for a war the likes of which hasn’t been seen since the founding.” She then looked directly at Scarlett, a plea in her ancient eyes. “Scarlett. Will you stand with us? Will you walk beside the Covenant Bond once more?”

Every eye was on her. The masters of the top guilds held their breath, expecting, wanting the grumpy failure to reject the legendary founder.

Scarlett waved a dismissive hand, her laziness a weapon. “Sorry, Lina. I’m busy.”

A satisfied murmur ran through the crowd. See? She knows her place.

But Karatos just chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound. He stepped forward and, in a move that shocked everyone, gently patted Scarlett’s head like she was still the wild young girl he’d met in a tavern millennia ago.

“You are still the same old Scarlett,” he said, his voice fond. Then he leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper for her alone, his breath tickling her ear. “My wild Scarlett.”

He straightened up, his face becoming a mask of grim determination as he addressed the hall. “As Guild Master Scarlett has told us, we must unite. The threat is unknown and divine. The demon was real. If the barrier falls and we lose, Sylphania is just the beginning. Our neighbors—Vernelia, Winslow, all of them—will be destroyed. This kingdom was built on sacrifice! We will not give up! We will not stop! We will become strong enough to protect it!”

His speech was a fire in the hearts of the listeners. Fear began to morph into determination. Nods of agreement spread through the crowd.

He turned back to Scarlett, his voice softening just for her. “I want you to join us, but I know Sylax has its own path. I cannot order you. No one can.” His voice rose again, echoing through the hall. “Because Sylax is the Untamed Guild of Sylphania! It may be the lowest in rank, but it stands at the top in heart and strength!”

He leaned in one last time, his voice a whisper so intimate only she could hear. “You are still untamed, and you are spreading your fire, making them untamed and strong.”

As he pulled back, no one noticed the brief, teasing brush of his lips against the tip of her ear before he straightened, a playful glint in his eyes. “And if you find any other Oni,” he added loudly, “please don’t poke their horns.”

Scarlett pouted adorably, a completely uncharacteristic expression that stunned her own team. “I don’t poke…”

Karatos’s laughter echoed as he turned and, with a final nod to Lina, strode from the hall. Lina offered Scarlett a small, knowing smile before dissolving into a shower of golden light.

The hall was left in a state of utter, bewildered silence.

Noa, his mind reeling, finally found his voice. “Guild Master… how… how do you know Lord Karatos and Lady Lina?”

Scarlett just shrugged, already looking bored again.

But Shojin exploded with energy, slinging an arm around a stunned Noa. “BECAUSE OUR GRAN—I MEAN, MASTER SCARLETT IS SOOO COOOOL AND STRROOOONNGGG!”

Kokan, the sole bearer of the full truth besides Lina and Karatos, couldn’t help a soft chuckle.

Sakura whispered to Sora, “So… that’s our Master Scarlett.”

Sora, his mischievous grin wider than ever, replied, “We can always expect the unexpected from her. It’s never boring.”

Kurohana, thoroughly confused by the whirlwind of social dynamics, tugged on Kokan’s sleeve. “Who was that man? Why was everyone whispering? I don’t understand any of this, but… he felt like a lord. Like my father was.”

Kokan put a calming hand on her arm and leaned close, his voice a soft murmur in her ear. He explained the Covenant Bond, the founding of Sylphania, why the other guilds coveted his lineage, and the simple, petty reason they despised Sylax. As he spoke, her confusion slowly melted into understanding, and her anger at the insults was replaced by a fierce, protective pride for her untamed family.

The Conclave was effectively over. The crowd began to disperse, shooting Sylax looks that were now a mixture of old disdain and new, bewildered curiosity.

Scarlett stretched lazily, sauntering over to a bench and flopping down onto it. “What a boring day. Except for the reunion. That was… acceptable.” She closed her eyes, looking for all the world like she was taking a nap.

Sora nudged Shojin. “I’m going for a walk to see the sights. Coming?”
“YEAH!CAPITAL ADVENTURE!” Shojin yelled, and the two of them dashed off, a whirlwind of chaos seeking new outlets.

Kokan, Kurohana, and Sakura sat on benches near their napping master, a silent, protective circle. Noa remained standing, his worldview shattered and reassembled in the span of an hour, his mind racing with a thousand unanswered questions.

The Untamed Guild of Sylphania had entered the lion's den, been insulted, vindicated, and had reunited with living legends, all before lunch. And as always, they had done it entirely on their own, beautifully, chaotically, untamed terms.

Chapter 51: The Prince and His Attendants

The Kingdom of Winslow did not simply function; it performed. It was a high-performance ecosystem fueled by ambition, enchanted engineering, and a touch of benevolent chaos. Its cities were lit by runes that pulsed with energy, its rivers glowed with soft, magical light, and its people carried a unique blend of fierce pride and dry sarcasm that was the national sport. And at the heart of this vibrant, sometimes tumultuous, machine was the royal family—the kingdom's greatest asset and most frequent source of diplomatic headaches.

King Vareon Thalos Winslow sat upon the Sunstone Throne, a battle-tempered strategist whose shoulders carried the weight of a kingdom and the silent, perpetual grief for his lost queen, Cornolia. She had been a soft-spoken legend from Oaktown in Sylphania, whose very presence had once stabilized half of Winslow's volatile politics. In her absence, the king ruled with a firm hand and a guarded heart.

His firstborn, Prince Izana, was the golden prototype heir: sharp, composed, and terrifyingly intelligent. He was a walking brand asset, the face of a modern, capable Winslow. The second prince, Renlor, was more fire than function, a warrior who trained at dawn and argued with seasoned generals by noon, his competence a brutal, unignorable force. The youngest, Princess Althea, possessed a deceptively sweet face that perfectly camouflaged a wit sharp enough to dismantle arrogant nobles with a single, softly spoken sentence. She was the kingdom's beloved wildcard.

Currently, that wildcard, along with her fiery brother, was pressed against the ornate doors to the throne room, ears straining.

"Shhh! I can't hear anything!" Princess Althea whispered, elbowing her brother, Renlor.

"Stop shoving! I'm trying to hear why Father summoned Izana so urgently in the evening!" Renlor shot back.

Leaning casually against the wall nearby, seemingly unconcerned but missing nothing, was Riku, the monkey-brained attendant. He put a finger to his lips with a grin. "Shhh, you two. Eavesdropping requires silence, not a commentary track."

Inside the throne room, Prince Izana bowed deeply. "You summoned me, Lord Father?"

King Vareon’s hand tightened on the arm of his throne, his knuckles white. "Izana. Lift your head."

Izana did so, his emerald eyes calm and analytical, taking in his father's tense posture.

The king's voice was a low rumble. "A rumor has reached my ears. A dangerous one. The divine barrier around Sylphania... it is weakening. What are your thoughts?"

Izana's eyes widened a fraction, the only sign of his internal alarm. His mind, a well-oiled machine of strategy and consequence, began turning instantly. "If it is true, Lord Father, then it is not merely a threat to Sylphania. It is a threat to Winslow, to Vernelia, to every kingdom beyond. Sylphania is the divine wall that holds back the demon realms. If it falls..." He paused, the grim picture clear in his mind. "War will begin. If Sylphania falls, the demons will conquer it, then the Lunara Wilds. They will reach Vernelia, and then us. Stopping them then would be... a near impossibility."

King Vareon nodded, a grim affirmation. "Your analysis is correct. This is not their problem alone. It is ours." He leaned forward, his gaze intense. "So, I have a mission for you."

Izana bowed again. "It would be my honor, Lord Father."

"The mission is this," the king declared, his voice echoing in the vast chamber. "You, the First Prince of Winslow, Prince Izana, will go to Sylphania. Not as a prince, but as a commoner. You will spy on the situation and report every detail to me directly. From this day forward, you will live there, become a citizen, and learn everything you can. If the need arises, we will lend our strength to Sylphania, but we must have the intelligence to act before the danger is at our gates."

Izana's composure finally cracked. His eyes widened in genuine shock. He could send a knight, a spymaster, anyone! Why me? But years of royal discipline kept the question locked behind his lips. "As you wish, Lord Father. But... where will I go? How will I avoid recognition?"

The king gestured to his steadfast attendant, Lord Sakaki, who stood silently nearby.

Sakaki stepped forward. "Your Highness, as you know, if you were to go to the Sylphanian capital or any major city, the risk of recognition is high." He paused, a faint, nostalgic smile touching his lips. "But your mother, Queen Cornolia, was from a small, unassuming town called Oakhaven. When His Majesty first visited, no one knew who he was. It was there that he found the empress, and she—"

AHEM! AHEM! The king's loud, deliberate cough cut through Sakaki's tangent, a faint blush tinging the monarch's cheeks.

Sakaki smoothly corrected course. "—Ahem. Yes. The point is, it is a town where royals are... irrelevant. You can blend in."

"Understood," Izana said, the pieces clicking into place. "But if it is so remote, how will we gather meaningful intelligence?"

"The lowest-ranked guild in Sylphania is located there," Sakaki explained. "A guild named Sylax. Adventurers are a nexus of information, rumors, and news. Infiltrating their ranks would be the perfect cover. You will become an adventurer."

Izana nodded slowly. The logic was sound, if utterly bizarre. "And how long will this operation last?"

"Perhaps one year. Or two. Or more," the king stated, his tone leaving no room for debate.

What in the blazes? A year or MORE? Izana's mind screamed, but his face remained a placid mask. "I understand."

The king waved a dismissive hand. "You may take your attendants. We cannot risk our prince alone. Good luck."

As Izana exited the throne room, he let out a long, weary sigh. The moment the door closed, three figures scrambled away from it. Renlor tried to look nonchalant, Althea adopted an expression of angelic innocence, and Riku simply grinned.

Izana fixed them with a deadpan stare. "What are you two doing?"

Althea immediately deployed her ultimate weapon, launching herself at him for a hug. "Big brother! We're just so worried about you! We overheard everything! You have to take care of yourself out there!" She looked up at him, her eyes wide and adorable.

Izana's stern expression melted. He patted her head fondly. "I'll be fine, Thea. Don't worry."

Riku burst out laughing. "She's good! She's really good!"

Shaking his head, Izana marched towards his private office. He flung the door open to find his other two attendants, Reina and Renard, surrounded by stacks of paperwork.

Reina, ever the serious swordmaster, didn't look up from a trade ledger. "You're back. The king's mood?"

Renard, the steadfast and slightly dense first attendant, set down a quill. "Is everything alright?"

Before Izana could answer, Riku swung in from the balcony, landing with a flourish. "You called, Master? Miss me already?"

Izana slumped into his chair. "Gather round. All of you. We have a mission."

The three attendants formed a line before his desk. "Ai!" they said in unison.

"We're going on an undercover mission," Izana began, the words feeling strange in his mouth. "Directly from the king. We are to travel to Sylphania, to a backwater town called Oakhaven. Our objective is to infiltrate the lowest-ranked guild there, named Sylax, become adventurers, and gather intelligence on the weakening barrier. We are to live as commoners for... an indeterminate period, possibly years."

Renard blinked. "The king could send a knight. Or a spy. Why you?"

Izana ran a hand through his jet-black hair. "I don't know what Father is thinking."

Riku, who had already started mentally packing, chimed in. "Master, my bag is already packed!"

Izana stared. "What?"

Riku just winked and strolled to the door, pulling it open to reveal a tumbling Prince Renlor and Princess Althea, who had been listening once more.

Izana pinched the bridge of his nose. "You two..."

Althea just beamed. "We're going to miss you, Big Brother!"

One Month Later

The transition from Winslow's rune-lit splendor to the rustic, untamed beauty of Sylphania had been a culture shock. Dressed in common, travel-worn adventurer's gear, the four of them—Izana, Reina, Renard, and Riku—finally stood at the edge of a lively town nestled against a serene lake and surrounded by ancient woods. A sign, slightly crooked, read: "Welcome to Oakhaven."

It was nothing like home. And that was the entire point.

"So this is it," Renard said, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword, his eyes scanning for threats with trained efficiency. "The front line of a potential continental war... looks like a quiet fishing village."

"Don't let the peace fool you," Reina cautioned, her sharp eyes missing nothing. "The most critical intelligence often comes from the most unassuming places."

Riku stretched his arms behind his head, a wide grin on his face. "I like it! It's got character. And look, no one's bowing! This commoner thing is great!"

Izana took a deep breath, the air clean and filled with the scent of pine and lake water. "Remember the rules. No titles. No formalities. We're just another group of hopefuls trying to

join the guild. Our story is we're from a small village in the northern reaches. Understood?"

Three nods answered him.

"Good," Izana said, a flicker of his adventurous spirit igniting despite the gravity of the mission. "Let's go find this 'Sylax' guild."

Meanwhile, in the Sylphania capital, the concept of "blending in" was a foreign language that Sylax had never bothered to learn.

Scarlett was still lazily napping on a bench in the grand plaza, completely unconcerned with the stares of passing nobles. The Crimson Fangs had returned from their grim delivery.

"Mission accomplished, Master," Yudai signed, his expression typically long-suffering.

Isamu leaned against the bench, striking a pose. "The demon is safely tucked away in the darkest, dampest cell they have. He was no trouble at all, thanks to your... shadowy packaging."

Pino hopped from foot to foot. "He's still unconscious! I poked him, and he didn't even twitch!"

Hayate grunted. "We saw you on our way back. Thought you'd still be in the stuffy Conclave."

Scarlett cracked open one crimson eye. "Too boring. They talk too much." She closed her eye again. "Good work. Now go be someone else's problem for a while."

As the Crimson Fangs dispersed to find food, a different kind of chaos was unfolding a few streets over.

"WOOHOO! LOOK AT THIS, SORA! A WHOLE STREET OF FOOD STALLS!" Shojin yelled, his voice carrying over the general hum of the city.

Sora, his silver-blue ponytail swishing, laughed as he kept pace. "Try not to set anything on fire this time, Shojin! My wallet can't handle another 'incident' fee!"

Their "walk" had devolved into a whirlwind tour of culinary disaster. Shojin was currently attempting to eat five roasted skewers at once while simultaneously marveling at a juggler, resulting in a minor sauce-related catastrophe.

Back near the bench, a pocket of calm persisted. Kokan and Kurohana sat on a nearby ledge, watching over their sleeping master. Sakura stood beside them, a gentle, protective smile on her face.

"It's strange," Kurohana murmured, her blood-red eyes hidden by a downcast gaze. "After everything... it's almost peaceful."

Kokan nodded, his stormy grey eyes thoughtful. "The calm between storms. We should use it to recover." His gaze drifted to Scarlett, a profound sense of loyalty warming his chest. She had faced down legends and a demonic assassin for them. This nap was the least she deserved.

Sakura placed a hand on Kurohana's shoulder. "This is what we fight for, Kuro. These quiet moments. This family."

Noa Tsukikame, the assigned knight, watched the entire scene from a respectful distance. His mind, once a neatly ordered file of royal protocols, was now a jumbled mess of awe and confusion. He saw the napping legend, the chaotic youths, the stoic veterans. They were a mess. They were undisciplined. They were the lowest-ranked guild in the kingdom.

And yet, they were the ones the founders themselves had acknowledged. They were the ones who had captured a demon. They were, against all logic and reason, the most fascinating and powerful group he had ever encountered.

He looked at the sleeping form of Scarlett, then at the determined faces of her apprentices, and finally at the chaotic energy of Shojin and Sora in the distance. A slow, reluctant smile spread across his face. He was stuck with them, alright. And for the first time, he wasn't entirely sure he minded.

In Oakhaven, Prince Izana and his team stood before a building that looked like it had survived a perpetual, joyful explosion. The sign above the door, slightly charred at one edge, clearly read: "Sylax."

From inside, they could hear the sounds of clashing mugs, raucous laughter, and what sounded like a small, contained magical explosion followed by cheers.

Riku's grin was ear-to-ear. "Oh, I have a good feeling about this place."

Reina sighed, already sensing a migraine. "Somehow, I knew you would."

Renard simply squared his shoulders. "The mission begins now."

Izana took a steadying breath, his emerald eyes fixed on the door. The fate of two kingdoms might just depend on his ability to fit in with the beautiful, chaotic disaster that was the Untamed Guild of Sylphania.

"Alright," Prince Izana said, pushing the door open. "Let's go become adventurers.”

Chapter 52: Only the Master Decides

The capital's grand plaza, with its polished stones and orderly citizens, felt like a cage after the raw energy of the Conclave. Scarlett stretched, her bones cracking audibly as she rose from her bench-nap. Around her, her team coalesced from the city's distractions.

"Alright, headaches," she announced, her voice slicing through the crisp morning air. "The political circus is over. Time to go home."

Shojin and Sora returned, the former with a new, suspicious stain on his tunic and the latter looking mildly singed but cheerful. Kokan and Kurohana stood ready, Sakura and the Crimson Fangs falling into step. Noa Tsukikame approached, his formal armor looking out of place amidst their travel-worn gear.

"Guild Master," Noa began, his tone a mixture of relief and lingering awe. "Your… escort duty is concluded. The capital guard thanks you for your cooperation."

Scarlett gave him a lazy, two-fingered salute. "Try not to miss the chaos too much, Knight-boy. It's bad for your pristine complexion."

Noa surprised himself by smiling slightly. "I will… endeavor to adjust to the quiet. Safe journey, Guild Master Scarlett. To all of you." His gaze swept over the odd, powerful, fiercely loyal group. He gave a final, respectful bow, not to a title, but to the untamed spirit they represented, before turning to march back to his orderly world.

With Noa's rigid form receding, the familiar, comfortable chaos of the Sylax dynamic snapped back into place.

"HOME! YES!" Shojin yelled, punching the air. "I miss James's cooking! And my bed! And the training dummies I haven't broken in days!"

"The statistical probability of those dummies surviving your return is approximately zero," Kokan noted dryly.

"Race you to the city gates!" Sora challenged, already taking off.

"HEY! NO FAIR!" Shojin blurted, a burst of flame propelling him forward in a clumsy but speedy dash.

Scarlett watched them go, a faint, unguarded smile on her lips. "Idiots," she murmured, the word laced with pure affection. "Alright, let's drag our carcasses home."

The journey back to Oakhaven was a familiar, decompressing routine. The further they got from the capital's stiff formality, the more the Sylax team relaxed into their true selves.

Meanwhile, in Oakhaven, Prince Izana took a steadying breath, his emerald eyes fixed on the door of the guild hall. The sounds from within were a symphony of controlled pandemonium: roars of laughter, the clash of wooden training swords, the clatter of mugs, and a distant, melodic twang followed by a yelp and someone shouting, “MY BUTT! YOU SHOT ME IN THE BUTT!”

“The fate of two kingdoms might just depend on my ability to fit in with this,” Izana muttered, more to himself than anyone.

Riku’s grin was practically splitting his face. “This is the best mission ever.”

Reina sighed, her hand instinctively resting near the hilt of her concealed sword. “It sounds like a tavern brawl in a weaponsmith’s shop.”

Renard simply squared his shoulders, his expression that of a man walking into a storm. “Stay alert. And remember, we’re commoners.”

“Alright,” Prince Izana said, pushing the door open. “Let’s go become adventurers.”

The wave of sound, scent, and sheer, untamed life that hit them was physical. The guild hall was a beautiful disaster. Adventurers of every size and race were everywhere—arm-wrestling on barrels, arguing over maps, attempting (and failing) complex magic tricks that produced more chickens than fireballs. Sunlight streamed through windows, illuminating dancing dust motes and the occasional stray spell-effect.

Renard’s eyes widened. “Wow… is this Sylax?”

Reina, ever practical, scanned the room. “First, we find the reception and formally apply.”

They navigated the chaos, receiving a few curious glances but mostly being ignored. They found the reception desk, a bastion of relative order manned by a young woman with focused eyes and a stack of ledgers that threatened to topple. This was Akira.

Izana approached, adopting what he hoped was a polite, commoner’s demeanor. “Excuse me, miss?”

Akira looked up, offering a professional, slightly weary smile. “Oh, hello. How can I help you?”

Riku leaned forward with enthusiastic charm. “We want to become adventurers! And join Sylax!”

Akira’s smile became apologetic. She bowed her head slightly. “I am very, very sorry, sirs, madam. But here, only the Master can decide who becomes part of Sylax.”

The four of them stared. It was a policy so absurd it momentarily short-circuited their royal-trained minds.

“I… beg your pardon?” Izana managed.

“Choosing guild members isn’t in my hands,” Akira explained, as if stating the sky was blue. “It’s the Master’s sole authority. If you want to post a quest, or need supplies, I can help. But joining? That’s up to her.” She gave another apologetic nod and returned to her ledgers, the conversation clearly closed.

Reina’s brow furrowed. “But… why?”

Akira didn’t look up. “Because it’s Sylax.”

Riku pouted dramatically. “But we want to join Sylax!”

Akira simply picked up a stamp and brought it down on a form with a decisive THWACK.

Izana stepped back, running a hand through his hair. “That’s… I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Renard leaned in. “What do we do, Iz— I mean, what’s the plan?”

Before they could strategize, a human whirlwind in the form of Hina came storming through the hall. She was muttering to herself, a stack of papers in her arms, her boots slamming against the floorboards with purposeful fury. “Stupid equations, stupid runic flux, who needs ambient mana stabilization anyway—” She wasn’t looking where she was going.

“Sorry!” she announced sarcastically, swerving to avoid a table. Her hand shot out to shove a passing chair out of her way, but she misjudged. The chair shot directly towards Izana’s chest.

Izana didn’t flinch. In a movement too smooth to be that of a backwoods villager, he caught the chair with one hand, stopping its momentum dead. At the same time, his other arm shot out, catching Hina by the waist as her own momentum threatened to send her sprawling over the now-stationary furniture.

The chaotic noise of the guild seemed to fade for a heartbeat around them.

Hina blinked, her furious muttering cut off. She looked up into calm, sharp emerald eyes that held no panic, only a mild, assessing curiosity. Her usual arsenal of sarcastic quips died in her throat. There was a weight behind his gaze, a latent authority that made her insides do a strange, unfamiliar flip.

“You okay?” Izana asked, his voice gentle but firm.

Hina's feet found the floor, but the heat in her cheeks wasn't just from embarrassment. "I… uh… yeah. Totally fine," she said, brushing herself off, her voice uncharacteristically small. His grip had been firm, controlled—completely at odds with the chaos she'd just been hurling herself through.

He didn't let go immediately, studying her with that same unnerving calm. Hina, for the first time in recent memory, felt her chaotic energy bristle not with annoyance, but with a spark of challenge… and interest.

"Good," he said. "Names?"

She tilted her head, the familiar bravado seeping back in, though it felt thinner than usual. "Hina. And you… are lucky I don't normally flatten strangers with furniture as a greeting."

A faint, genuine smirk touched his lips, sending another inexplicable tingle down her spine. "Noted. Izana," he replied casually.

Before the strange, charged moment could develop further, a voice cut through the guild noise. "HINA! WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE MENACE?!"

Hina's eyes went wide. In a flash, she ducked behind Izana, using him as a shield. "Shh! Don't tell him I'm here!" she whispered, pressing close.

A burly mage with a smoking beard stormed past, scanning the crowd. "I KNOW YOU USED MY PRIMAL ESSENCE ELIXIR! THREE YEARS OF WORK, HINA! THREE YEARS!"

He stomped off towards the kitchen, muttering curses.

Hina peeked out from behind Izana and let out a dramatic sigh of relief. Their backs were pressed together from her hiding maneuver.

Izana looked over his shoulder, amused. "What did you do?"

Hina scratched her cheek, a mischievous glint returning to her eyes. "Ummm… I may have used his precious, irreplaceable, three-year-brewing potion as… shampoo? I thought it was the new lavender-scented detangling rinse. It was in a pretty bottle."

Izana stared at her for a second, then let out a short, genuine bark of laughter. The sound was warm and rich, and it made Hina pout.

"It's not funny! My hair has never been so… spiritually attuned! I accidentally divined the location of a lost sock!"

THWACK!

A wooden training mug bounced off the back of Hina's head. "Ow! Mio!"

Mio Amatsuki stood there, her violet eyes unamused, another mug in hand as if considering a second throw. “Seriously, Hina. William is about to transmute your boots into angry geese. What did you do?”

“I told him! Shampoo mix-up!”

Mio’s jaw dropped. “Hina… he synthesized that from a tear of a moon-weeping willow! It was for a high-level barrier ritual!”

“Well, now my hair has great barrier potential!” Hina shot back, defiant.

Mio pinched the bridge of her nose, finally noticing the four strangers. “Oh. Hello. Who are you all?”

Izana gave a polite nod. “We’re here to join Sylax and become adventurers.”

In perfect, almost rehearsed unison, Hina and Mio said, “Oh! Bad luck. Only the Master can decide.”

Hina gestured with her thumb. “So, Akira already shot you down, huh?”

Renard nodded. “She did.”

Mio hopped up to sit on a nearby table, gracefully avoiding a plate of half-eaten eggs. “Want to join us for breakfast? The bacon’s only slightly magical today.”

The offer, delivered so casually amidst the bedlam, was too intriguing to refuse. They settled at the table, the Winslow team observing the guild’s ecosystem with fascinated horror.

“I’m Mio Amatsuki, of the Celestia Pact,” Mio introduced, gesturing with a fork. “And this walking disaster is Hina.”

Izana took the lead. “I’m Izana. This is Renard—call him Ren—Riku, and Reina.”

Mio nodded, chewing. “Not from Oakhaven, I take it?”

“A small village to the west,” Izana said smoothly, the cover story holding.

“Huh.” Hina studied them, her earlier intrigue returning. “So why come all the way here? To Sylax?”

Izana met her gaze. “We heard about it.”

Renard, playing his part, added, “The lowest-ranked guild in Sylphania.”

Hina chuckled, and Mio gave a small, knowing smile. Together, they corrected him, their voices layered with pride: “The Untamed Guild of Sylphania.”

It was a title spoken with weight, a badge of honor. The Winslow team nodded as if they understood, though the true meaning was only just beginning to dawn on them.

Reina, ever the strategist, saw an opening. “This ‘Master’… where would we find her? We’d like to speak with her.”

Hina took a swig of juice. “Umm, Master’s not here. Got summoned to the capital.”

“The capital? Why?” Reina pressed.

Mio’s expression turned serious, the casual breakfast mood shifting. “The Grand Conclave.”

Just then, Leon the spellsword drifted over like a melancholic ghost. He leaned in, his voice dropping to a theatrical, spooky whisper that sent a chill down their spines despite the surrounding noise. “Because the barrier is weakening… not from time… not from nature… but because in the demon realm… someone with divine energy is our enemy…”

The words hung in the air. For Izana’s team, it was a terrifying confirmation. The rumor was true. The threat was real, and it was worse than they’d imagined.

Izana’s mind raced. How is that possible? A divine power aiding demons?

His internal turmoil was interrupted as Hina kicked his shin under the table, not maliciously, but to get his attention. “Hey, you spaced out. Look, if you want to meet the Master, you gotta wait ’til she gets back. If you’re gonna wait, there’s an inn down the road, ‘The Tipsy Treant.’ Tell them Hina sent you, they might not overcharge you too much.”

She then stood, grabbing the still-whispering Leon by the collar. “C’mon, spooky. You’re helping me find a counter-charm for geose-transmutation before William finds me.” She dragged him away, leaving the Winslow team at the table.

Mio finished her meal and stood as well. “It was nice meeting you. Good luck.” With a graceful nod, she hurried off towards the training yard, calling out, “Kael-sensei! I’m ready for my morning forms!”

The four of them were left alone in the swirling chaos, the remnants of breakfast before them.

Riku let out a low whistle. “Well. They’re… something else.”
Reina’s eyes were calculating.“The information is valuable, but the source is… unpredictable.”
Renard shook his head.“A guild where the receptionist can’t enlist members, shampoo causes international incidents, and children casually discuss divine warfare with demons. What have we walked into?”
Izana stared at the door through which Hina had disappeared,then at the vibrant, screaming, living entity that was the Sylax guild hall. A slow, determined smile spread across his face. It wasn’t the royal, polished smile he used in court. This was the smile of an adventurer staring

at a fascinating, dangerous puzzle.
“We’ve walked into the heart of it,”Izana said. “The confirmation is here. The danger is real. And our path in is through that ‘Master.’ So we wait. We watch. And we learn how to become part of this ‘untamed’ family.” He stood up. “First, let’s find this ‘Tipsy Treant.’ It’s time to get properly undercover.”
As they filed out of the raucous hall,the door swung shut, muting the chaos behind them. The mission had officially begun, and its first lesson was clear: in Sylax, nothing—especially not becoming a member—was ever simple.

Chapter 53: Misnamed, Not Misjudged

Several days had passed since Izana and his team arrived in Oakhaven, each one a masterclass in controlled chaos and subtle revelation. They'd secured a room at The Tipsy Treant, where the innkeeper—a retired adventurer with one eye and a permanent smirk—had indeed given them the "Hina discount" (which mostly meant they got extra bacon and fewer questions).

Their days were spent observing, gathering fragments of information that painted a picture far more complex than any royal briefing could contain. They witnessed guild members returning from quests covered in glittering slime, arguing passionately over the taxonomy of forest sprites, and engaging in arm-wrestling matches that sometimes escalated into minor, contained magical duels.

More than once, townsfolk had done a double-take upon seeing Izana. An elderly woman selling herbs had gasped, "Cornie? My stars, you've… grown taller?" before blushing and apologizing profusely. A grizzled blacksmith had squinted at him and muttered, "The likeness is uncanny… but you've got your father's bearing in the shoulders," before going back to his hammering without another word. Each incident was a puzzle piece, confirming his mother's deep roots here and the shadow her absence still cast.

A coded letter had been sent to Winslow via a discreet merchant caravan. "Oakhaven secured. Intel confirms barrier decay is deliberate, orchestrated by an external divine force. Infiltration point identified: the guild 'Sylax.' Entry pending approval of its master, a figure of significant but unquantifiable local influence. Awaiting contact. Morale is… adaptable. The local definition of 'normal' is expansive."

Now, standing at the edge of town as the sun began to dip, they watched a familiar, ragtag group approach the "Welcome to Oakhaven" sign.

"Finally! Home!" Shojin's voice carried across the fields, followed by his explosive sprint toward the guild hall. Sora raced beside him, laughing. Sakura walked with a veteran's calm smile, the Crimson Fangs following with their usual relaxed swagger. Kokan and Kurohana brought up the rear, their presence quieter but no less steady.

The guild hall door burst open under Shojin's enthusiastic shove.

THWACK!

A flying loaf of bread, part of an ongoing food-based debate about aerodynamic pastry, hit the doorframe above his head.

"OI! YOU'RE BACK!" a chorus of voices roared. The usual chaos amplified into a welcoming frenzy. Adventurers swarmed them, clapping backs, demanding stories.
"How was the capital?Full of stuffed shirts?"

“Did you see the palace?Is it really made of white marble or is that just propaganda?”
“Did anyone try to arrest Shojin?Please say yes!”

Izana’s team watched from their usual corner table, Hina beside them. She’d become their reluctant, sarcastic guide to Sylaxian customs.

“See?” Hina whispered, nodding toward the door as the rest of the returning party filtered in. “Master’s back.”

Their eyes tracked the newcomers. Sakura was immediately engulfed by her party members from the Ironclaw Battalion. Sora was pulled into a huddle by other Celestia Pact members, their conversation a rapid-fire exchange of gestures and grins. Kokan and Kurohana slipped through the crowd with practiced ease, heading for the stairs and the relative quiet of their rooms.

And then, she entered.

Scarlett moved through the jubilant throng like a ship cutting through celebratory waves. She didn’t push; the crowd simply parted for her. She looked… supremely bored. And tired. She beelined for a large, cushioned chair that seemed to be hers by unspoken law, currently occupied by a grumpy dwarf nursing a huge mug of ale.

Without a word, Scarlett reached down, plucked the mug from the dwarf’s hands, and took a long, deep drink as she sank into the chair he’d just vacated.

“HEY! That’s mine! I waited for that!” the dwarf spluttered.

Scarlett lowered the mug, a lazy smirk on her lips. “Your wait is over. My thirst isn’t. Go get another.” She kicked her feet up on a nearby stool, closed her eyes, and sighed, the very picture of a creature finally in its natural habitat.

“That’s… her?” Izana asked, his voice low. The master of Sylax was a woman who looked like she’d rather be napping than leading a guild, draped in casual clothes and an aura of profound, grumpy relaxation.

Hina nodded. “In the flesh. Don’t let the laziness fool you. That’s when she’s most dangerous.”

Reina’s eyes were sharp, analyzing. “Her posture is completely open, yet no one crowds her. That’s not just respect. It’s instinctive self-preservation.”

Riku was practically vibrating. “I love her! Can we talk to her now?”

“Wait for the welcome chaos to die down a— and he’s gone.” Hina sighed as Izana stood up, his decision made. Renard and Reina rose to flank him, and Riku bounced alongside.

They navigated the celebrating crowd. Izana took a steadying breath and approached the chair where Scarlett was now idly swirling the stolen ale.

“Excuse me,” he began.

Scarlett’s eyes were shut. She took another sip.

“Master?” Izana tried again, a little louder.

One crimson eye slit open, fixing on him with the focus of a drowsy hawk. Then, both eyes flew open.

CLUNK.

The mug slipped from her fingers, hitting the wooden floor with a dull thud, ale splashing. The dwarf, who had been hovering nearby hoping for a return, quickly snatched it back with a triumphant grunt.

But Scarlett wasn’t looking at the mug. She was staring at Izana as if she’d seen a ghost. Her usual grumpy mask was gone, replaced by pure, unvarnished shock. She slowly rose from the chair, her movements devoid of their typical lazy grace.

“Cor…” her voice was a breath, barely audible over the guild noise. “…Corn… Cornelia?”

The name, his mother’s name, spoken with that mixture of shock and aching familiarity, hit Izana like a physical blow. How does she know that name? That face?

Scarlett blinked, the haze clearing from her eyes. She looked again, really looked, and saw the masculine lines of his jaw, the taller stature, the sharper cut of his emerald eyes. The ghost of a young woman she once knew resolved into a young man who shared her face.

“Oh,” Scarlett said, the shock melting into something more complex—amusement, nostalgia, and a flicker of sadness. She ran a hand through her dark hair, a rare self-conscious gesture. “I am sorry. I thought you were someone else.”

Izana let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “It’s… never mind.”

But Scarlett wasn’t done. She leaned in, peering at his face with an intensity that made him want to lean back. Her crimson eyes scanned every feature. “Is there anything wrong?” he asked, unnerved.

“Nah,” she said finally, scratching her chin thoughtfully. “It’s just… you look too much like Cornelia. Spittin’ image, ‘cept for the…” she gestured vaguely at his whole, male presentation.

The old dwarf who’d lost his mug piped up, “Oy, Master, why ya comparin’ the lad to little Corn? She was a gentle flower, this one’s all… pointy.”

A woman from the nearby table, a warrior with scarred knuckles, smacked the dwarf's arm. "He's a man, you blind old bat! But she's right. Got her eyes. And her smile, when she was scheming."

Scarlett waved a hand, cutting off the burgeoning analysis from the peanut gallery. "Whatever." She turned, yawning massively, and began shuffling towards the stairs, clearly intending to escape to her office and her nap.

This was his chance. "Master!" Izana called out, his voice firm. "We want to join Sylax!"

Scarlett stopped mid-step. A slow, wide smirk spread across her face, an expression that held more predatory interest than joy. She turned back, her earlier sleepiness replaced by a sudden, focused energy. "What," she said, her voice dropping into a dead-serious, flat tone that seemed to suck the ambient noise from their immediate vicinity, "did you just say?"

The four of them felt a collective chill. This was a different Scarlett.

He repeated, more firmly, "We wish to join your guild."

"Huh." Scarlett sauntered back, not to her chair, but to a clear space at a long table. She pulled out a chair and sat down, leaning forward, elbows on the table, steepling her fingers. She looked like a queen holding court… or an interrogator. "Sit."

They sat, the sturdy wood of the chairs feeling suddenly like witness stands. The guild's noise seemed to fade around their little bubble of tense silence.

"Why," Scarlett asked, her crimson eyes locking onto each of them in turn, her voice still that unsettling, serious monotone, "do you want to join?"

The pressure was immense. Riku, fueled by nervous energy, broke first. "We're from a tiny village! Nowhere to go, nothing to do! We're here to take real quests, make a name, and maybe afford something that isn't boiled potatoes every night!" It was a good performance—the enthusiastic, rough-around-the-edges youth seeking glory.

Scarlett's expression didn't change. She simply stared, waiting.

Renard met her gaze steadily. "I'm not here for glory. I'm here to understand. To learn how the world truly fights, lives, and survives. That's all." His answer was sincere, echoing his genuine soldier's curiosity, even if the context was a lie.

A flicker in Scarlett's eyes. Approval, perhaps, but her face remained a stern mask.

Reina spoke next, her voice cool and analytical. "This guild looks… chaotic. But it functions. It's oddly effective. I can work with that." It was a compliment wrapped in clinical assessment.

A tiny, almost imperceptible smirk tugged at the corner of Scarlett's mouth, gone as quickly as it appeared. Her gaze finally settled on Izana, the weight of it feeling heavier than any crown.

Izana took a breath, drawing on the half-truth that felt most real. "We're… running from expectations. From a life that was chosen for us. This guild… it feels like a place where nobody cares who you're supposed to be. Only what you are."

Silence. Scarlett leaned back in her chair, the serious mask still in place, but her eyes were moving between them, calculating, weighing. They felt transparent, like children caught in a lie they weren't even sure she'd called them on yet. The nervousness was a tangible thing in the air. Had they failed? Was this the moment they'd be thrown out?

Finally, Scarlett broke the silence, her voice still low and serious. "Who are you all? Names."

They gave them, sticking to their story: Izana, Ren, Riku, Reina, from a nameless western village.

Scarlett listened, her gaze never leaving Izana's face. She could smell the lie on them—the too-clean boots, the perfect calluses in the wrong places, the way Reina's eyes automatically mapped exits and assessed threats. But there was something else underneath it. A spark in Riku's chaos, a genuine thirst for knowledge in Renard's calm, a sharp, adaptable mind in Reina's analysis, and in Izana… a burden of duty he was trying to hide, and a face that spoke of a story she knew too well.

Kids playing at being wild, she thought, a thread of amusement weaving through her assessment. Clean kids who've never truly tasted the dirt. But the potential's there. And he's Cornelia's boy. Sylph would have my head if I turned him away.

She maintained the deadly serious expression, letting the tension stretch until they were practically squirming. Then she sighed, a long, dramatic sound, and waved a hand vaguely towards the reception desk where Isamu was, as usual, trying and failing to flirt with a stone-faced Akira.

"You four…" Scarlett began.

They braced for rejection.

"…Akira! See them!"

She then slumped back into her chair, kicked her feet back up, and closed her eyes, the interview clearly over. The sudden reversion to her lazy persona was jarring.

Izana's heart sank. 'See them.' A dismissal. A command to have them removed. They'd been judged and found wanting. He shared a look of horrified failure with his team. The mission had crashed before it even began.

Akira appeared, not with guards, but with a clipboard and four sheets of parchment. She handed one to each of them along with a quill.

Riku stared blankly at the form. “What’s… this?”

“Guild registration forms,” Akira said, as if it were obvious. “Fill them out. Name, age, known skills, preferred weapon, any magical affinities, allergies, and… section five is for listing any deeply held grudges against inanimate objects. It’s for archival purposes.”

The four of them froze, their brains struggling to process. Forms? They hadn’t been rejected? They looked from the papers to the seemingly asleep Scarlett, then back to Akira.

“How…?” Izana whispered.
“Why?”Reina breathed.

Leon, who had materialized beside them like a gloomy specter, sighed dramatically. “Only the Master knows the workings of her mind. It is a labyrinth of whim and granulated sugar. Uff.” He drifted away.

They bent to the task, filling in the forms with their cover identities, their hands slightly unsteady from the emotional whiplash. As Izana wrote ‘Izana of Westhaven’ in the name field, a voice cut through his concentration.

“Oi. Goldy.”

The nickname was so absurd, Riku snickered into his form. Izana looked up. Scarlett’s eyes were still closed.

“Yes, Master?”

“You know someone named Cornelia. Looks like you. Same… vibe.”

Izana swallowed. “Yes. She’s my mother.”

Scarlett’s eyes opened. She turned her head just enough to look at him, that earlier smirk returning. She examined him anew, as if confirming a theory. “Your mother, huh?” The old dwarf had said Cornelia disappeared 25 years ago. This boy said she got married 25 years ago. The timeline clicked into place with a quiet, sentimental snap.

“Oh,” Scarlett said, the sound soft. “So she got married.” A genuine, warm smile touched her lips, there and gone in a flash. “I wonder how her son ended up… like this.” The ‘this’ was loaded with meaning.

She stood, stretching with another yawn that was only half-feigned this time, and began walking towards the stairs. As she put her foot on the first step, Izana found his voice again.

“How… how do you know my mother?”

Scarlett paused, but didn't turn. When she spoke, her voice was different. Softer, tinged with a nostalgia that was rare for her. "She was the soul of this town." Then, even quieter, a whisper meant just for him that still carried through the guild's din to his ears: "Welcome. Make yourself at home, little gold corn."

And then she was gone, vanishing up the stairs.

Izana stood rooted to the spot, the words echoing. Little gold corn. A nickname born of his mother's name and his hair. It was unbearably affectionate, utterly disarming, and it came from the grumpiest, most terrifyingly perceptive person he'd ever met.

Akira reappeared, collecting the forms. She gave a small, efficient nod. "Wait here."

Minutes later, she returned holding four pendants. Each was a simple leather cord holding a teardrop of crimson crystal. Embedded in the crystal, glowing with a faint inner light, was the wild, looping symbol of Sylax.

As she placed one around each of their necks, the weight of the crystal settling against their chests, the guild hall, which had been watching the entire proceedings with keen interest, erupted.

A roar of approval shook the rafters. Mugs were banged on tables. Someone started a chant of "NEW-BIES! NEW-BIES!" that was quickly taken up.

A massive hand clapped Izana on the back, nearly sending him into his soup. "HA! Welcome to the madhouse, goldy!" a bearded brawler roared.
A lithe rogue materialized beside Reina,giving her an appreciative once-over. "Well, hello there, sharp-eyes. Need someone to show you the ropes? Preferably somewhere… private?"
Reina fixed him with a gaze so frosty it could have chilled a volcano."The only rope you need to worry about is the one I'll use to hang you from the rafters if you don't remove yourself."
The rogue paled and scurried away.Several nearby adventurers howled with laughter.

Shojin bounded over to Riku, grabbing his hand for an enthusiastic, overly complicated Sylax handshake that Riku, to his credit, picked up with chaotic glee. "YES! NEW FIRE-BRAT! We can practice together! I can show you my Phoenix Blaze! Wanna see?!"

Hina watched from her table, a small, unreadable smile on her face as the old-timers crowded around Izana, their voices overlapping.
"Cornelia's boy!I should've seen it!"
"Your mother used to beat me at cards every Market Day.Cheerfully, too."
"She healed my leg after that wyrm incident.Fine woman. How is she?"
"You got her spirit in those eyes,lad. Welcome home."

Izana answered their questions as best he could, his mind reeling. This wasn't just infiltration. He was being embraced by his mother's past, by a family she'd never told him about. The mission parameters were blurring, the lines between duty and something deeper

becoming dangerously thin.

He looked around at the cheering, chaotic, warmly invasive guild hall—at the laughing Riku being shown a “proper” fireball stance by an eager Shojin, at Renard being challenged to an arm-wrestle by a grinning Hayate, at Reina already dissecting a quest board with a group of serious-looking veterans. He touched the smooth, warm crystal of his Sylax pendant.

They were in. Officially, irrevocably in. Not as spies, but as members of the Untamed Guild.

And as the noise and warmth washed over him, a disquieting thought settled in Prince Izana’s mind: he had no idea which kingdom he was truly serving anymore.

Chapter 54: Welcome to the Madness

The welcome party for the four new members had escalated from “festive” to “glorious, controlled anarchy” by the time midnight painted the sky. The guild hall was a living entity of noise, movement, and questionable decisions. Adventurers were passed out on tables, snoring in harmony with the clatter of mugs. A spirited, if deeply inaccurate, rendition of a famous ballad was being shouted from atop the bar by a chorus of dwarves. In a corner, a serious debate about whether a treant counted as ‘furniture’ or ‘a roommate’ was devolving into a wrestling match.

Riku had blended in seamlessly, perhaps too well. He was arm-in-arm with a pair of grinning rogues, a mug in each hand, leading a slurred song about a donkey and a disgraced wizard. “I TOLD YOU, REN!” he yelled across the room, spotting his stoic friend. “THIS PLACE IS THE BEST! THEY HAVE A SONG FOR EVERYTHING! EVEN FOR TAX FRAUD!”

Renard gave a long-suffering wave, nursing a single ale and observing the chaos with the analytical eye of a general surveying a particularly unruly battlefield.

Izana, his princely smile muscles aching from hours of forced geniality, finally slipped through the crowd towards the large double doors leading to the back courtyard. The cool night air hit him like a physical relief, muffling the riotous noise to a distant, cheerful roar. He took a deep breath, the scent of night-blooming flowers and damp earth clearing his head.

For the mission. It’s all for the mission, he reminded himself, leaning against the wooden railing of the porch. The weight of the lie, of playing a part in this warm, accepting bedlam, felt heavier out here in the quiet.

He wasn’t alone. A few feet away, Kokan Tohei leaned against the railing, his posture relaxed but his stormy grey eyes fixed on the moon-dappled forest beyond the guild walls. He seemed carved from a different stone than the boisterous crowd inside—calm, contained, an island of stillness in the sea of Sylax’s chaos.

Izana approached cautiously. “Is it… always like this?” he asked, gesturing vaguely with his thumb towards the thunderous noise.

Kokan didn’t reply for a moment, his gaze still distant. Then, without looking, he said, “Define ‘this.’”

“The noise. The… uncontrolled celebration. The sheer volume of people and personality.”

Kokan finally turned his head, his eyes assessing Izana with a quiet intensity that was more unnerving than any guildmaster’s glare. “You get used to the decibel level. The chaos is a constant. It’s the ecosystem.”

Izana leaned on the railing beside him, studying his profile. There was a noble bearing to him, an innate grace that no amount of commoner's clothing could hide. "You seem… different from the rest of them. You don't quite fit the… mold."

Kokan's lips quirked in the barest hint of a smile. "You could think so."

"A noble, huh?" Izana pressed, his spy's instincts overriding his need for quiet. "What's a noble doing in the 'lowest-ranked guild in Sylphania'?"

The smile grew a fraction. "My grandparents' wish."

"Your grandparents? I wonder who they are, to send their heir to this particular house of madness."

Kokan let out a soft chuckle, a rare, genuine sound. "I, too, spent many nights wondering that very thing. 'Why here?' They could have sent me to the finest academies, the most prestigious knightly orders. Yet their will was clear. Here."

Izana's curiosity sharpened. "So, they're big nobles, then? Dukes? Council members?"

Kokan turned fully to face him, his expression unreadable. "I forget not everyone here knows. My apologies. I am Kokan Tohei. Grandson and descendant of Lady Lydia and Lord Zohan."

The names landed with the force of a hammer blow. Izana's princely composure shattered for a full three seconds. The Covenant Order founders. The legends. His mind raced. A founder's direct descendant… in this place? Why? This changes everything about the intelligence value of this guild!

"The… the founders?" Izana managed, his voice strained.

Kokan nodded, watching his reaction with mild interest.

Izana scrambled to process this. A figure of such historical and political weight, hiding in plain sight in a backwater guild. "So… you must be counting the days until you can return to a more… luxurious life in the capital? Take up your rightful place?"

Kokan's answer was immediate and utterly calm. "No."

"No?" Izana was genuinely baffled. "Why… no?"

"If you had asked me that the day I arrived," Kokan said, looking back at the guild, where a crash followed by uproarious laughter sounded, "I would have said 'yes.' I wanted order. Silence. Respect. A life that made sense." He paused. "But here… they never demanded anything of me. They didn't bow. They didn't care about my name, only the person attached to it. They accepted me, not my legacy. There are no expectations here, only possibilities. It is… liberating. And it is nothing like the rest of Sylphania."

He then turned his analytical gaze back to Izana. “And you? Why are you here, Izana?” He’d clearly read the registration forms. “You also have the bearing of someone accustomed to more than ‘boiled potatoes.’ You move like you’ve been trained, not just in a village militia.”

Izana launched into his cover story, the tale of restless youths from a stifling hamlet. It flowed smoothly, practiced. Kokan listened, his expression neutral. When Izana finished, Kokan simply chuckled again.

“No worries,” he said, the words laden with a quiet understanding that said, I know you’re lying, but your secrets are your own. It was deeply unsettling.

Izana steered the conversation back, sighing. “So, this… welcome ritual. It’s standard?”

Kokan nodded, a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “For every new member. Think of it as a baptism by ale, song, and mildly property damage. You will get used to it.” He gave Izana a firm, comradely pat on the back that was startling in its familiarity. “Try to get some sleep. Tomorrow, the real work begins.” With that, he slipped back inside, a shadow melting into the brighter chaos.

A moment later, Reina emerged, her steps silent. She’d been observing from the doorway. “I overheard. His background is… significant.”

“It changes the entire calculus,” Izana murmured, his mind racing. “This isn’t just a low-ranking guild. It’s a haven for… anomalies. For power hiding in plain sight.”

Reina nodded. “I’ve been observing the composition. There are nobles, yes, minor ones. But also former soldiers from other kingdoms’ armies, prodigies from isolated magical bloodlines, individuals with… unique talents that don’t fit elsewhere. Their backgrounds are a mosaic. Yet the dynamic is cohesive. It’s a family, but one built on chosen loyalty, not blood or rank. It’s… militarily inefficient but socially formidable.”

“Have you learned anything else of tactical value?” Izana asked, slipping back into mission mode.

“The guild’s strength is currently dispersed. Many members are not here. Not on simple quests. I heard mentions of ‘Decade Quests,’ ‘Fifty-year contracts,’ even ‘S-rank reconnaissance.’ Parties like the Celestia Pact have only just returned from one. The Crimson Fangs are preparing for another long-term deployment. The guild’s true power isn’t what’s in this hall tonight. It’s spread across the continent, doing… who knows what.”

Izana’s eyes widened. “S-rank? Century quests? No reputable guild stakes its reputation on such long-term, high-risk ventures. The failure rate…”

“Is apparently not a deterrent here,” Reina finished. “It suggests either staggering recklessness or confidence in power we have not yet seen.”

They were interrupted by a scene unfolding back inside by the fireplace. They moved to the doorway. At a table near the hearth, Mio Amatsuki sat, her violet eyes locked with laser-like intensity on Shojin, who was holding court with a group of wide-eyed junior adventurers, reenacting the “Battle of the Giant Turnip” with wild gestures.

Beside Mio, Hina stood, munching on a breadstick. Izana and Reina drifted over.

“She’s been like that for an hour,” Hina said around her food, nodding at Mio.

Izana followed her gaze. Mio wasn’t blinking. Her hands were clenched in her lap, her cheeks held a faint, permanent pink hue. “Is the boy… her crush?” Izana asked, a genuine smile returning to his face.

Hina snorted. “Crush? That’s a gentle word for the volcanic eruption of confused feelings happening over there. It’s more like a celestial body caught in a gravitational pull with a hyperactive comet. It’s hilarious.”

Reina watched, perplexed. “The subject of her fixation appears to be demonstrating poor tactical form in his storytelling. He’s leaving his left side open to hypothetical attack.”

Both Izana and Hina looked at her, then at each other, and burst into simultaneous, muffled laughter. Reina’s brow furrowed, not understanding the joke.

Suddenly, Shojin’s story reached its climax (involving a heroic, fiery somersault). He finished with a flourish, and his gaze swept the room, landing on their little group. Specifically, on Mio.

Mio’s internal monologue became visible in the stiffening of her spine. Don’t walk over here. Don’t walk over here. Don’t walk over here. Do walk over here. NO, DON’T!

Shojin, blissfully oblivious, beamed and started weaving through the crowd towards them. With every step, Mio’s blush deepened from pink to rose to a spectacular, neon crimson.

“Hey, new guys! Welcome again!” Shojin said, clapping Izana on the arm with enough force to stagger a normal man. He nodded to Reina. “This is the best guild! You’ll see!” Then his sunny attention turned to the human furnace beside him. “Hey, Mio!”

He was now right in front of her. Mio’s eyes were glued to a fascinating knot in the wooden floor. Her mind was a scream of static. Don’t look up. Don’t look up. He’s too close. He smells like smoke and sunshine. ABORT. ABORT.

“Wow, Mio,” Shojin said, his head tilting with genuine concern. “You’re, like, really red. Are you sick? Do you have a fever?” Driven by pure, dumb compassion, he reached out and pressed the back of his hand to her forehead.

The touch was electric.

Mio's gaze snapped up, locking with his. His face was inches away. His emerald eyes were filled with simple, worried curiosity. Her heart decided it was a drum major in a parade and began a frantic, riotous beat against her ribs.

Shojin's eyebrows drew together. "Whoa. You're boiling. You should really see Yuki, I think you've got demon-flu or somethi—"

POW!

Pure, panicked, self-preservation instinct took over. Mio's fist, moving with the speed of a celestial shooting star, connected squarely with Shojin's sternum.

"OOF!" The air left his lungs in a comical wheeze. He was launched backward, sailing over a table and landing with a crash against the main quest board, sending parchments fluttering down around him like confused birds.

Mio stood frozen for a second, her fist still extended, steam practically rising from her entire body. Then her eyes rolled back, her legs gave out, and she collapsed in a graceful heap on the floor, a single, blissful, delirious whisper escaping her lips: "Sh… Sho… Shojin-sama…"

For a heartbeat, there was silence in their corner of the hall.

Then Hina lost it, doubling over with silent, shoulder-shaking giggles. Izana, the stress of the day momentarily forgotten, joined her, a warm, genuine laugh bubbling up.

Sora materialized from the crowd, took in the scene—Shojin groaning under a pile of quests, Mio unconscious and smiling dreamily—and burst into loud, crowing laughter. "AGAIN? She KO'd him AGAIN? This is the best!" He nudged Hina, who was wiping tears from her eyes.

Izana's laughter died abruptly as he watched Hina and Sora share the moment. Sora slung an arm around Hina's shoulders in a familiar, friendly way, and she leaned into the gesture, still giggling. A strange, cold knot tightened in Izana's stomach. His smile felt plastered on.

Sora, sensing a presence, looked up and saw Kael Hoshigami standing at the foot of the stairs, his wise wolf-ears twitching, one silver eyebrow arched.

"Uhh… Kael-sensei!" Sora stammered, quickly removing his arm from Hina. "We were just… she, uh… he… it was an accident! A tactical fainting spell! Very advanced!"

Kael sighed a sigh that spoke of millennia of dealing with youthful idiocy. "Just take her upstairs, Sora. And someone dig Shojin out of the paperwork before he suffocates."

As Sora gently scooped up the unconscious Mio, Hina turned to Izana. She'd seen his smile vanish. "What happened? You okay?"

The cold knot loosened at her attention. His smile returned, softer now. "Nothing. It's… nothing. Just a long day."

“It’s a lot to take in,” Hina said, her voice unusually gentle. “For a newbie, I mean. You should probably get some rest. Upstairs, third door on the left after the creaky step. That’s yours.”

He smiled at her, a real one this time. “Thank you, Hina. For everything.” He nodded to Reina, and they headed for the stairs.

In the corridor upstairs, Renard joined them, looking weary. “Riku is… integrated. He’s asleep under a table, snoring with a half-dwarf named Brond.”

Izana just nodded, his earlier good mood evaporated. He entered the small, simple room assigned to him and went straight to the small desk, pulling out a sheet of fine parchment and a traveling inkwell.

Reina and Renard lingered by the door, leaning against the frame. They exchanged a glance.

What happened? Renard mouthed.
I don’t know,Reina’s sharp eyes replied. He was laughing. Then the blue-haired one, Sora, appeared with Hina. His expression changed.

They watched as Izana wrote his coded report with sharp, precise strokes, the set of his shoulders tense. The friendly prince was gone, replaced by the focused, burdened heir.

After a few minutes, he sanded the paper, folded it, and sealed it with a plain drop of wax. “You two should get some rest,” he said without turning, his voice carefully neutral. “Tomorrow is the beginning of our real operation here.”

They took the hint and slipped out, the door clicking shut behind them.

Only then did Izana’s shoulders slump. He finished securing the report and lay back on the narrow bed, throwing an arm over his face. The sounds of the dying party below were a muffled hum. In his mind’s eye, he saw Hina’s laughing face, the easy way Sora had touched her. He saw Kokan’s calm certainty. He felt the warm weight of the Sylax pendant on his chest. He heard the old-timers asking about his mother with genuine affection.

What are we doing here? The thought was treacherous. Who am I spying for? And what, exactly, am I trying to learn?

The questions swirled, unresolved, until exhaustion finally pulled him into a fitful sleep.

Downstairs, the party was winding down. A few dedicated souls were still arm-wrestling. A group was harmonizing softly, and badly, in a corner. Most were asleep where they sat, snoring creating a peculiar symphony.

Behind the reception desk, the night shift had taken over. Akira had long since retired. In her

place sat a young woman named Jeane, her eyes wide as saucers as she took in the scene—the sleeping bodies, the gently glowing embers in the fireplace, the peaceful aftermath of the storm.

“Wowwww,” she whispered to herself. “Is this… really a guild?”

Beside her, Johan, a more seasoned receptionist with a permanent look of benign exhaustion, didn’t look up from his ledger. “It’s Sylax,” he said, as if that explained everything. He glanced at her awe-struck face and added, “The Untamed Guild of Sylphania.”

Jeane repeated the title slowly, tasting the words. “So it’s true. It’s really the Untamed Guild.”

Far from the guild, on a secluded, moonlit beach where the waves of a vast lake whispered against the shore, a lone figure sat. The silver light cast his form in silhouette, revealing only a strong profile and the glint of a bottle in his hand as he took a long drink, his gaze fixed on the twin moons hanging in the sky.

The night was still. The only sound was the water and the faint rustle of the wind.

Then, the figure lifted his other hand. Something small and solid caught the moonlight, throwing back a deep, crimson gleam.

It was a pendant. A simple leather cord held a teardrop of crimson crystal. And within the crystal, glowing faintly with an inner light as if in answer to the moons, was the wild, looping, unmistakable symbol of Sylax.

He held it tightly, his thumb stroking the smooth surface, his expression hidden in shadow. Was it a gesture of longing? Of regret? Of grim determination?

The lake offered no answers. It just continued to whisper against the sand, holding the secret of the stranger with the guild’s crest close to its dark, silent heart.

Chapter 55: Whispers and Glances

The morning after the welcome party dawned bright and mercifully quiet in Oakhaven. Inside Sylax, the cleanup was already underway, a process that involved less cleaning and more triage—separating the merely unconscious from the genuinely comatose, and identifying which stains were magical (and therefore temporary) and which were just shame (and therefore permanent).

Hina and Mio had been tasked with one of the guild's many community service duties: delivering four barrels of James's special "Hangover Helper" pickled eggs to various market vendors. It was a punishment disguised as a chore, a classic Sylax move.

"I don't even like pickled eggs," Hina grumbled, rolling a heavy barrel towards the door. "Why do we have to deliver the evidence of his culinary crimes?"

Mio, struggling with her own barrel, offered a serene smile. "It builds character. And forearm strength."

"My character is fully built, thank you. It's sarcastic and slightly volatile. My forearms are fine."

They maneuvered the barrels out the front door into the sunlight, where they immediately saw Shojin attempting to balance on a wobbly fence post while juggling three apples.

"Oi! Fire-brat!" Hina yelled. "Stop defying gravity and come make yourself useful!"

Shojin, without missing a beat (or an apple), hopped down. "Delivery duty? Awesome! I'll carry the heaviest one!" He grabbed a barrel and hoisted it onto his shoulder with a grunt, his other hand still casually juggling. "See? Multitasking!"

From across the street, Izana observed the scene. He'd been on a morning reconnaissance walk, mapping the town. Seeing the trio—or more specifically, seeing Hina in the morning light, annoyed and vibrant—he changed course.

"Good morning," he said, approaching with a friendly, easy smile that was becoming more natural by the day. "Need an extra set of hands?"

Hina looked him up and down, a smirk playing on her lips. "Well, you've got two of them, and they're not currently juggling produce, so you're already ahead of our resident circus act. Sure. That last barrel's a fighter."

Izana hefted the final barrel. "Lead the way."

The small procession wound through Oakhaven's cheerful, bustling market streets. Mio and

Shojin took the front, Shojin chattering a mile a minute about the aerodynamic properties of pickled eggs. Mio walked beside him, her gaze fixed straight ahead, a faint, permanent blush on her cheeks.

Behind them, Izana and Hina walked in comfortable sync. Izana kept stealing glances at Hina's profile, at the way she scowled at a particularly loud merchant, at the clever glint in her eye.

"So," Izana said, nodding towards the pair in front. "Is this a common formation? The silent blushing comet and the talking supernova?"

Hina snorted. "You have a way with words, Goldy. And yeah. It's a natural phenomenon. Happens whenever those two share an atmosphere. We're just here to prevent collateral damage."

They delivered the first two barrels to a grateful (and slightly fearful) grocer. Now down to two barrels—Shojin carrying one, Izana the other—they continued.

As they walked, Hina drifted up beside Mio. Leaning in, she whispered directly into her friend's ear, her voice a low, sly murmur that Izana and Shojin couldn't hear. "Hey. You and Shojin. Good luck. Ask him."

Mio stiffened, her eyes going wide. She shot Hina a panicked what-are-you-doing look, but Hina just winked and deliberately slowed her pace, falling back beside Izana.

A few steps later, Hina stopped. "Hey, you two!" she called out.

Shojin and Mio turned. Izana looked at Hina, curious.

"Sorry, guys," Hina announced, her tone breezy. "Me and Izana just remembered. We, uh… planned something. We gotta go. Right now." Before anyone could react—before Mio could protest, Shojin could ask, or Izana could express his utter confusion—Hina grabbed Izana's free hand.

The contact was electric. Her hand was warm, calloused from tool use and magic, and it closed around his with decisive strength.

"Wha—?" was all Izana managed before Hina yanked him, and he had to break into a run to avoid dropping the barrel or being pulled off his feet. They dashed down a side alley, leaving a bewildered Shojin and a catastrophically flustered Mio standing in the street with the last barrel.

"My tactical analysis did not account for this maneuver," Reina's voice said flatly from a shadowy doorway where she and Renard had been observing their prince's mission. Renard just scratched his head.

Mio's mind was a screaming void. I… and Shojin-sama… alone. Together. With a barrel. Her internal temperature spiked.

Shojin blinked at the space where Hina and Izana had vanished. "Huh. Okay! Guess it's you and me, Mio! C'mon, the fishmonger's this way!" He hoisted his barrel again and marched off, completely oblivious to the existential crisis happening beside him.

Mio floated after him, a pink-tinted ghost. "O…okay… Sh-Sh-Shojin-sama."

Hina and Izana didn't stop running until they were two streets over, tucked into a narrow, shaded alley between a bakery and a potion shop. They were both breathless, less from the run and more from the sudden, strange energy of the escape. Hina was still holding his hand.

Izana, leaning against the cool stone wall, looked at their joined hands, then at her, a playful, breathless grin on his face. "Wow. That was… abrupt. Is there a fire? Or did you just really want to hold my hand?"

Hina flushed, the red climbing from her neck to her cheeks. She dropped his hand as if it were a hot coal. "Shut up," she muttered, looking away. "It was tactical."

"My hand is… tactical?" Izana's grin widened. He leaned a little closer. "I think I like it."

"I said shut up," Hina shot back, but there was no heat in it. She leaned against the opposite wall, trying to look casual and failing miserably. "We didn't plan anything."

"So the daring escape, the clandestine alley meeting… this is just your everyday, casual behavior?" He pushed off his wall and took a step into her space, not crowding her, but close enough that she had to look up at him.

She gently placed a hand on his chest, pushing him back a half-step. "It's called 'creating an opportunity.' Now be quiet and look." She peeked around the corner of the alley, back towards the main market street.

Izana leaned in, his chin nearly brushing her hair as he followed her gaze. Down the street, he could see Shojin's bright hair and Mio's silver-blue ponytail, standing together by a stall. He let out a soft, understanding chuckle. The sound rumbled close to her ear. "Oh… that kind of tactical. I see."

"Exactly. Now stop breathing down my neck, you're a terrible spy." But she didn't move away.

They became shadows, slipping from doorway to doorway, a pair of utterly unsubtle, giggling spies tailing their friends. Hina would point out Mio's increasingly stiff posture. Izana would note Shojin's complete, blissful ignorance. They whispered commentary like they were watching a particularly absurd play.

“She’s going to combust,” Izana whispered as Mio accepted a small flower from a vendor Shojin had paid.
“Any second now,”Hina agreed, biting her lip to keep from laughing. “Look at her. She’s holding that flower like it’s a live grenade.”
“He has no idea.None. It’s magnificent.”

Finally, Shojin and Mio delivered the last barrel. As they turned away, Shojin’s eyes lit up at a market game stall—a simple challenge where you used a small paper net to catch tiny, enchanted, swimming crystal fish from a tank.

“Hey, Mio, let’s try! I’ll win you a bigger fish!” he declared, already pulling her towards it.

Mio, her courage buoyed by the flower and the alone-time, finally spoke up as he paid the stall keeper. “Shojin-sama… I have a question.”

“Spill the beans, Mio!” he said, focusing intently on the shimmering fish.

“Umm… have you ever been to Lake Ozark? In the valley?”

Shojin shrugged, his eyes tracking a fast-moving sapphire fish. “Yeah, sure! Went with my dad when I was a kid. Why?”

Mio’s voice grew even softer. “I… I remember someone there. Who looked like you. When I was five, I fell in the lake. I couldn’t swim. I was drowning. He… a boy with hair like the sun… he jumped in and pulled me out. He smiled just like you.”

Shojin’s hand, holding the paper net, went still. The memory surfaced through years of chaotic recollections—a cold lake, a splash, a little girl with silver hair crying, his dad yelling, getting a hero’s scoop of ice cream afterwards. He slowly turned his head, his enthusiastic expression melting into one of genuine, dawning wonder. He leaned closer to Mio, his emerald eyes scanning her face, her hair, as if seeing her for the first time.

“No way,” he breathed, a huge, incredulous grin spreading across his face. “That was you? The little silver minnow? I can’t believe it! WOOHOO! That’s awesome!” He threw his arms up in victory, forgetting the net, which fluttered into the fish tank.

Behind their hiding spot—a large cart of pumpkins—Hina was so engrossed in the scene, so thrilled by her successful matchmaking, that she leaned too far. Her foot slipped on a rotten pumpkin.

CLURK! SQUELCH!

She let out a tiny yelp as she started to fall sideways.

Izana moved without thinking. His arm shot out, wrapping around her waist and pulling her back against him. His other hand came up to cover her mouth, stifling any further noise. In

an instant, they were pressed together in the narrow space between the cart and the wall,his back to the stone, her back against his chest, hidden from view. He could feel her heart hammering against his arm.

They froze. They heard Shojin's voice. "Huh? You hear that?"
Mio's voice,shaky. "A cat…?"

A moment later, a disgruntled orange tabby jumped down from the cart with a meow and sauntered away.

The imminent threat passed, but the reality of their position remained. Izana was acutely aware of the warmth of her through their clothes, the scent of ozone and ink that clung to her hair. Hina was rigid, every nerve ending on fire where his arm held her, his hand still gently covering her mouth.

Slowly, carefully, he lowered his hand from her mouth and loosened his grip around her waist. She stumbled forward a step, putting precious distance between them. They didn't look at each other. Both faces were flaming.

"I… umm… I am sorry," Izana stammered, staring intently at a very interesting crack in the cobblestones.

"It's… it's okay," Hina mumbled, studying the sky as if checking for rain. "Reaction. Instinct. Whatever."

He offered a hand to help her step fully out of the pumpkin debris. She took it, her touch brief and electric, and then let go as if burned.

"I could… use a drink," Izana managed, his voice still unsteady.

"Yeah. Thirsty. From the spying. Very demanding work," Hina agreed, nodding too fast.

They found a small outdoor café with shaky iron tables. They sat, the silence between them loud and awkward. A cheerful waitress bustled over.

"Good morning, you two! A bit flushed, aren't we? Big walk?" she chirped, her eyes twinkling. "We have a lovely Couple's Sundae Special today if you're interested! Two spoons, one bowl, very romantic!"

"NO!" they blurted in unison, their voices an octave too high.

"NOT THAT!"
"JUST WATER!"
"AND ICE CREAM!SEPARATE BOWLS!"

The waitress blinked, shrugged, and left. The shared panic broke the tension. They looked at

each other and, despite their deep mortification, a small, shaky laugh escaped Hina. Izana followed, the sound a little breathless. The strange, intense bubble popped, leaving behind a confusing, fizzy warmth.

Back in the Sylax training yard, a different kind of tension existed—the kind born of utter, grumpy indifference.

Scarlett was hanging upside down from a thick oak branch by her knees, her crimson hair brushing the dirt. Below her, Kokan and Kurohana moved through a synchronized kata, water and fire weaving around each other in a dangerous, beautiful dance.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Three slow, sarcastic claps echoed. Scarlett flipped down, landing silently. “Oi. Coldy. Princess. You two look like a fancy fountain display. Pretty. Useless in a back-alley brawl.”

Kokan stopped, lowering his water-wreathed hands. “Master? How do we improve?”

Kurohana extinguished her flames. “Yes, what training pattern should we follow?”

Scarlett yawned, stretching her arms over her head. “Figure it out. I’m not your dance instructor.” She turned and began ambling back towards the guild hall, leaving them standing in the dust.

Kokan and Kurohana exchanged a look—one of shared frustration and resigned understanding. They collapsed onto the grass under the oak tree, sweating and breathing heavily.

Kurohana took a long drink from a waterskin. “Where’s Shojin? He missed training.”

Kokan accepted the waterskin from her. “He was… recruited. By Hina, Mio, and the new one, Izana. For a delivery mission.”

“Ah.” Kurohana lay back on the grass, staring at the leaves. “So… now what?”

Kokan finished drinking, his gaze thoughtful. “Now, I am going to keep my eyes on you.”

Kurohana sat up, frowning. “After the attack… you’re always nearby. You don’t have to, you know.”

“How can I leave a princess alone?” he said, his voice quiet but firm. “The Shadow Fang proved you are a target. Until the threat is understood, proximity is the simplest defensive strategy.”

“Thanks for worrying about me,” she said, her own voice softening. “But you really don’t have to—”

“It’s my choice,” he interrupted, not harshly, but with a finality that brooked no argument.

The air between them grew thick with something unspoken, a charge that had nothing to do with their elements. Kurohana, flustered, grasped for a new topic. “Hey… I heard about your sister. Tell me about her?”

Kokan’s stern expression melted. A genuine, soft smile touched his lips, transforming his face. “Emi… she’s my little sister. She’s at a boarding school in the capital. She’s… clever. And kind. And she writes me letters complaining about her etiquette lessons.” His smile widened. “I haven’t seen her in months.”

Kurohana watched the smile, the way it lit up his stormy eyes. She found herself smiling back, a warmth spreading in her chest that had nothing to do with her demonic fire. “Emi Tohei,” she repeated softly. “She sounds lovely.”

Elsewhere in the guild, the other new arrivals were conducting their own reconnaissance. Riku was trying and failing to learn a complicated card game from a group of grizzled veterans. Renard was politely refusing yet another arm-wrestling challenge. Reina stood by the quest board, not reading it, but analyzing the people.

Riku bounded over to them. “Have you seen the Master? I wanna ask her about proper quest protocols!”

Renard shook his head. “She vanished after verbally dismantling Kokan and Kurohana’s training.”

Reina’s eyes were narrow, calculating. “There is something here,” she murmured, more to herself than them. “A pattern beneath the chaos. The way they guard each other. The secrets they all seem to hold. The way the Master operates with absolute, unchallenged authority despite her… presentation.” She looked at Izana’s empty chair, then towards the door. “And our prince is currently… otherwise engaged. There is more to this ‘Untamed Guild’ than a simple information network. I feel we have stepped into the center of a web, and we cannot yet see the spider.”

The chapter ends with the warm, confusing echo of a laugh shared over ice cream, the soft rustle of leaves over a quiet conversation between a water-bender and a fire-princess, and the cold, analytical click of a puzzle piece not yet fitting into place. The madness of Sylax continued, a symphony of whispers, glances, and secrets humming just beneath the surface of the laughter.

Chapter 56: Sylax Unleashed

Several days had bled into the comfortable, chaotic rhythm of Sylax life for the new members. Izana found himself spending an inordinate amount of time in Hina's orbit—'accidentally' being in the library when she was researching, 'happening' to take lunch at the same time, his mission-based observations now perpetually tinged with a personal curiosity he couldn't quite squash.

Today, however, seemed like any other. The guild hall was a study in beautiful dissonance. Scarlett was fast asleep on a cushioned bench, a half-eaten apple balanced on her stomach rising and falling with her breaths. Leon was holding court with Reina and Renard, spinning a dramatic tale.

"…and so I told the Basilisk, 'my dear, if you're going to glare, at least do it with some conviction!' And it was so offended, it turned itself to stone out of sheer pique! True story!"

Reina stared, her face a mask of polite, utter disbelief. Renard just slowly sipped his tea, his expression suggesting he was trying to calculate the metabolic rate required for such a feat.

Outside, the steady thwap-crack-hiss of training echoed. Shojin, Kurohana, and Kokan were a blur of fire, shadow, and water in the yard, their movements growing more synchronized by the day, drenched in sweat and determination.

Then, the main door creaked open with a deliberate, dramatic slowness.

A group of five adventurers strode in. They wore matching grey tunics with a stylized, snarling wolf's head emblem on their pauldrons. Their postures were rigid, their chins held high, radiating an aura of practiced superiority that clashed violently with Sylax's relaxed chaos. Their guild pendants—obsidian with a silver wolf—were prominently displayed.

The lead man, a broad-shouldered warrior with a close-cropped beard and cold eyes, scanned the room. His gaze swept over sleeping masters, arguing mages, a rogue trying to pick the lock on the guild's own cookie jar, and a dwarf meticulously braiding another dwarf's beard.

A collective, unimpressed silence from the Sylax members greeted them. Conversations didn't stop; they just acquired a new, sarcastic edge.

"Ooh, matching outfits," someone whispered loudly. "Must be laundry day for the stiff-necks brigade."
"I give them ten seconds before they trip over their own dignity."

The leader, Draven Holt, cleared his throat. "I am Draven Holt, Vice-Captain of the Night Fangs of Grayfall! Guild rank: 42nd! The Wolfshade Brigade!"

No one looked up from their cards, their books, their naps.

His jaw tightened. “I challenge this guild! A test of strength and honor! We’ve heard the… rumors. We’ve come to see if the so-called ‘Untamed’ guild is all bark!”

A few people chuckled. James, from the kitchen doorway, yelled, “We don’t do ‘honor’ before lunch! It gives the stew indigestion!”

Flushing with anger, Draven’s eyes swept the room again. They landed on Leon, who was now attempting to demonstrate his basilisk-staring technique to a horrified Reina. “You!” Draven pointed a gauntleted finger. “The green-haired jester! I, Draven Holt, challenge you to a duel! A real fight!”

Leon looked up, blinked, and a brilliant, playful smile spread across his face. He stood, stretching languidly. “Oho? A challenge? For little old me? Well, if you insist. But you have to promise not to cry when you lose. I’m sensitive to the sound of grown men weeping. It clashes with the ambiance.”

The guild hall erupted in noise, but not the kind Draven expected.

“BETTING POOL’S OPEN!” Hayate bellowed, slamming a barrel onto a table. “Odds on Leon winning by embarrassing monologue: 2 to 1! Odds on Leon winning by ‘accidental’ tickle attack: 5 to 1! Odds on the stiff actually landing a hit: 20 to 1!”
“I’ve got five gold on Leon making him surrender out of sheer confusion!”
“I’ll take that!Ten gold says the outsider’s armor is so polished he slips on his own ego!”

Scarlett stirred on her bench, one crimson eye cracking open. She took in the scene, sighed a sigh of profound suffering, and muttered, “If you’re going to fight, take it outside. You’re blocking the sunlight and my will to live.” She closed her eye again.

The entire guild—or at least, three-quarters of it—surged towards the doors, a chattering, betting, food-grabbing tidal wave. Hina tapped Izana’s shoulder, her eyes gleaming. “C’mon, Goldy. This is gonna be good.”

Izana, Reina, Renard, and Riku were swept along in the human current, emerging into the training yard where Shojin, Kokan, and Kurohana had paused, panting and curious.

The scene was surreal. Sylax members lined the edges of the training grounds, some sitting on the fence, others perched in trees, many with plates of food or mugs in hand. It had the air of a grotesque picnic.

“OI LEON! DON’T FORGET THE FINISHING POSE!” Shojin yelled, jumping up and down.
“Make it graceful!”Sora added. “I’ve got a bet riding on aesthetic value!”
“Just don’t get his blood on my good training dummies!”James called from the back. “They’re marinating!”

Izana felt a presence and turned. The wise, wolf-eared leader of the Celestia Pact, Kael Hoshigami, had appeared beside them, leaning calmly on his crescent staff. A moment later, Scarlett shuffled out, coming to stand grumpily next to Kael, arms crossed.

“Didn’t think you’d come watch this nonsense, Kael,” Scarlett droned.
Kael’s wise eyes crinkled.“I thought the same of you, Master. Yet, here we both are.”
Scarlett eyed the preening Draven.“It’s like watching a gilded rooster challenge a fox to a dance-off. It’s so stupid it’s circled back to being interesting.”
Kael chuckled softly.“Indeed.”

The Winslow team watched this exchange, their eyes wide. The casual, almost familial dynamic between the legendary Celestia Pact leader and their grumpy master was another piece of the impossible Sylax puzzle.

In the ring, Leon bounced on the balls of his feet, grinning. Draven Holt assumed a rigid, textbook combat stance, his sword held before him. “Enough games! Begin!”

The fight started smoothly, almost disappointingly so for the Sylax audience. Leon was all fluid evasion and playful taunts.
“Your footwork is sosquare! Do they teach you that, or did you absorb it from a particularly rigid building?”
Swish!Draven’s sword cut air.
“Ooh,close! You nearly parted my hair! I’m rather fond of it!”
Thwack!Leon darted in, landing a light, stinging punch to Draven’s armored side, more an insult than an injury.

The Sylax crowd cheered and groaned in equal measure, their betting slips fluttering.
“C’mon,Leon, stop toying with your food!”
“He’s going for the humiliation victory!I called it!”

Draven’s face, initially confident, was growing red with frustration. He was being made a fool of in front of his own team and this rabble. His attacks became heavier, less controlled. The playful dance began to tilt.

Leon, sensing the shift, tried to end it with a disarming flourish. He spun, aiming to knock the sword from Draven’s grip.

He misjudged.

Draven, in a burst of angry strength, didn’t parry. He reversed his grip and slammed the pommel of his sword into Leon’s temple as he spun past.

CRACK.

The sound was sickeningly solid.

Leon’s playful grace vanished. His eyes glazed over. He stumbled, a line of crimson tracing down his cheek, and collapsed to the grass, motionless.

The cheering died instantly.

For a second, there was only the sound of the wind. The Sylax members went still. The laughter vanished from their eyes, replaced by a cold, unified blankness.

Draven, breathing heavily, stood over Leon’s still form. A nasty, triumphant smirk touched his lips. He wasn’t done. He raised his sword, not to salute, but point-down, aiming a vicious, final stomp-down strike at Leon’s unprotected shoulder—a move meant to shatter bone, to cripple.

He never made it.

The air in the training yard changed. It didn’t grow cold; it grew heavy. The playful, chaotic energy that defined Sylax condensed into something dense, sharp, and utterly lethal. It was a silent, collective inhalation of pure, unfiltered rage.

What happened next wasn’t a coordinated attack. It was an eruption.

One moment, Draven was standing victorious. The next, he was the epicenter of a nightmare.

A throwing dagger sprouted from the pauldron of his sword arm, its point pricking his skin at the throat. At the same time, inky black shadows—Scarlett’s shadows—shot from the ground, wrapping around his legs and torso like iron bands, freezing him mid-strike. Kael was suddenly there, his hand a vice around Draven’s wrist, the bones creaking in protest, the sword clattering to the ground.

But it wasn’t just them. It was everyone.

Hayate was two feet away, his massive warhammer held loosely, but his eyes promised a red paste. Sakura had her shield edge poised at Draven’s kidney. Three rogues had materialized from seeming nowhere, short blades hovering near arteries. Mio’s sword was half-drawn, celestial light glinting. Even Shojin’s fists were wreathed in fire so hot the air wavered, his usual grin replaced by a snarl.

Not a word was spoken. But the message was screamed in the silent, deadly aura that pressed down on the yard: Touch him again, and you cease to exist.

Yuki, the healer, and two others had already rushed past this wall of lethal intent, dropping to their knees beside Leon, their hands glowing with urgent, gentle light.

The members of the Night Fangs were frozen in terror, their earlier arrogance evaporated. The sheer, terrifying speed and unanimity of the response had been breathtaking. This wasn’t a guild. This was a single organism with a hundred deadly limbs, and they had just

poked its heart.

For Izana, Reina, Renard, and Riku, it was a visceral shock. The warm, chaotic, silly family was gone. In its place stood a predator of unimaginable efficiency. The bloodlust in the air was so thick it was hard to breathe. Reina's tactical mind short-circuited; there was no protocol for this. Renard's hand had gone to his own sword hilt purely on instinct. Riku's playful energy was completely snuffed out. Izana could only stare, his princely composure shattered. This… this is their true face.

The leader of the Night Fangs, Lyren Ashfall, a man with weary eyes, finally broke from his stupor. He pushed through his paralyzed team, his face pale with horror. He didn't try to fight. He saw the truth. He dropped to his knees in the dirt before the silent, deadly ring of Sylax members.

"STOP! PLEASE!" His voice was raw. "He's an idiot! A fool! Please, forgive him! He took it too far! We yield! WE YIELD!" He was begging, his forehead almost touching the ground. "Please, don't… just let us take him and go. Please."

The heavy silence held for a moment longer. Then, from the grass, a weak, bloody hand waved.

Leon, consciousness returned thanks to Yuki's healing, gave a thumbs-up. His voice was raspy but clear. "Alright, alright… party's over, you scary bunch. Let the poor rooster go. His feathers are sufficiently ruffled."

It was like a spell breaking. The dagger withdrew. The shadows receded. Kael released the wrist. The rogues melted back into the crowd. The crushing, deadly aura dissipated as quickly as it had formed, leaving behind the normal Oakhaven air.

The Sylax members stepped back, their lethal focus evaporating, replaced by a sudden, intense interest in the sky, their fingernails, anything but the scene before them.

"Hmph. Told you he'd slip on his ego," someone mumbled, walking away.
"Well,that was… dramatic. Anyone want the rest of my pie?"
"I think Leon's buying drinks for a month for making us waste a good betting pool on a disqualification."

Lyren scrambled up, grabbing the stunned, trembling Draven and hauling him away without a backward glance. The other Night Fangs practically tripped over themselves in their haste to follow.

Leon sat up, wincing as Yuki finished her work. He looked around at his guild, a wide, knowing grin on his face. "Aww, you guys. You were all so worried about me! I'm touched! Really!"

The response was immediate and unified denial.

“WORRIED? HA! I was worried you’d scuff the grass!”
“You owe me twenty gold,you overconfident twit! You lost!”
“I just didn’t want to have to fill out the‘death-by-incompetence’ paperwork, Leon. It’s a triplicate form.”
“We were just bored.It looked more interesting to threaten him than to go back to mopping.”

Leon laughed, shaking his head. “Uff. They’re never gonna admit it.” But his smile was warm, and the looks the other members shot him—quick, assessing glances to ensure he was really okay—were filled with a fierce, unspoken affection.

Scarlett yawned, the sound exaggerated in the now-subdued yard. “Well, that was a thing. Naptime interrupted for that. I’m going back to sleep. Try to keep the attempted murder to a minimum before dinner.” She shuffled back inside.

Kael gave a small, approving nod to the guild at large and followed.

The crowd dispersed, the chaotic noise slowly building back to its usual level, as if a switch had been flipped back to ‘Sylax Normal.’

Izana, Reina, Renard, and Riku stood shell-shocked on the periphery.

“What,” Izana whispered, his voice hoarse, “was that?”

Reina’s face was pale, her analytical mind struggling. “It was… a coordinated defensive reaction. But without coordination. It was instinct. A shared instinct.”
Renard exhaled slowly.“For a second there… it felt like the world was about to end. That wasn’t anger. That was… promise.”
Riku,uncharacteristically quiet, just nodded, his usual bravado completely absent.

Izana looked at the laughing, bickering, back-to-normal guild members—the same people who had, moments ago, been a heartbeat away from collective slaughter. He touched the warm crystal of his Sylax pendant.

“What,” he repeated, the question settling deep in his soul, “is Sylax really?”

He had come to spy on a low-ranked, chaotic guild. He was beginning to fear he had instead enlisted in a sleeping dragon. And he had just seen it open one eye.

Chapter 57: The Legend Returns

The Sylax guild hall was a pressure cooker of untamed energy. It wasn't the usual cheerful chaos; it was sharper, louder, as if the very air was vibrating with restless power. The temperature of wildness, as Kokan quietly observed, had been steadily rising for days.

Izana sat with his team at a corner table, picking at a stew he barely tasted. His eyes, however, were fixed on Hina. She sat alone at a nearby table, stirring her soup absently, a deep frown etched on her face. She'd been unusually quiet, her usual sarcastic energy replaced by a pensive, almost anxious stillness.

"The aura last week," Reina murmured, following her prince's gaze but speaking of the incident with the Night Fangs. "It was not trained cohesion. It was… primal. A shared reflex. I have studied unit tactics across three kingdoms. I have never seen anything like it."

Renard nodded, his voice low. "And have you noticed the quest board? It's overflowing. James posted seven new contracts this morning alone. Yet, no one is taking them. Look."

They all glanced at the main board. It was buried under layers of parchment—requests for swamp drake culling, lost heirloom retrievals, herb gathering from dangerous cliffs. Not a single one was marked 'Accepted.'

"It is statistically anomalous," Reina stated. "Adventurers live on quest rewards. This is deliberate avoidance. They are… waiting."

"For what?" Riku asked, uncharacteristically serious.

"That is the question," Izana said, finally pulling his eyes from Hina. A strange protectiveness had been gnawing at him since he saw her so subdued. "What is Sylax really bracing for?"

Across the hall, the usual symphony played at a frenzied pitch. Shojin, Kokan, and Kurohana shared a table with Pino, who was methodically devouring a mountain of mashed potatoes.

"—and so I say, it's Adventurer Hibernation!" Shojin declared, tapping his cheek with a finger as if unveiling great wisdom. He tossed a sausage into the air and caught it in his mouth. "See? Low energy! Saving it! Everyone's just… charging up!"

Kurohana sighed, pushing her food around her plate. "Shojin, that's not a thing. And it doesn't explain why the quest board looks like a paper avalanche."

"The guild's 'temperature' is definitely elevated," Kokan observed, his stormy eyes scanning the room. Hayate was snoring loudly on a far table, a tower of empty mugs beside him. Isamu was in his usual spot, leaning against the reception desk, delivering a flirty monologue to a stone-faced Akira, who was stamping forms with enough force to splinter the wood. The Celestia Pact argued quietly over a map. The Ironclaw Battalion arm-wrestled. Yudai was

silently dominating a chain of challengers. Leon, head still bandaged, was attempting to juggle lit candles while standing on one hand, much to everyone's shouted encouragement and bets.

It was chaos, but it was a wound-up chaos. A spring coiled too tight.

"Maybe," Kurohana ventured softly, "they sense a storm coming. And they're all… coming home."

Before Shojin could invent another theory, the main door burst open.

A veteran adventurer—Gareth, a grizzled axeman—stumbled in, chest heaving. His face was pale, his eyes wide. "HE'S BACK!" he shouted, the words ripping through the din.

The noise dipped slightly. A few people glanced over. Isamu didn't stop flirting. Izana's gaze remained on Hina, who hadn't looked up. Shojin was mid-sausage toss.

Gareth sucked in another breath, his voice a booming, disbelieving roar. "HE'S BACK! HE'S AT THE GATE!"

An old dwarf slammed his mug down. "OI! WHO'S BACK, YOU PANICKING PIXIE? SPIT IT OUT!"

"ARE YOU TRYIN' TO GIVE US HEART FAILURE?" a rogue yelled.

Gareth steadied himself, planted his feet, and bellowed with every ounce of his being: "ARVEL STORMHART IS BACK!"

The reaction was instantaneous and electric.

The last of the noise didn't just die—it was sucked out of the room. For a heartbeat, there was perfect, ringing silence.

Then, it erupted.

Smiles widened into incredulous grins. Smirks turned into shouts of joy. Mugs were dropped, chairs scraped back. A wave of pure, unadulterated euphoria crashed through the hall. "STORMHART?!" "HE'S ALIVE?!" "THE HUNDRED-YEAR QUEST?!" "HE'S HOME!"

Izana's team jolted in their seats. Reina's analytical mask slipped into pure confusion. Renard's jaw went slack. Riku stared, captivated.

Kokan and Kurohana exchanged a look of profound shock. "Arvel… Stormhart?" Kurohana whispered. The name meant nothing to her, but the guild's reaction said it meant everything.

Izana's eyes finally left Hina—because Hina was moving. At the name, her head had snapped up. All color drained from her face. Her eyes, wide and trembling, went from

confusion to a shock so deep it looked like physical pain. The spoon fell from her numb fingers, clattering on the plate. A single, silver tear welled up and traced a path down her cheek before she brutally swiped it away. She stood up so fast her chair toppled over, but she didn't seem to notice. Her gaze was locked on the door.

Seeing her like that—vulnerable, shattered, electrified—sent a jolt through Izana that had nothing to do with his mission. His protective instinct flared, hot and urgent, mixed with a sharp, unfamiliar pang of… something else.

Shojin, meanwhile, had frozen. The sausage he'd just tossed hit him on the head and rolled away. All his vibrant, chaotic energy was gone, replaced by a statue-like stillness. His emerald eyes were fixed on the entrance, empty of recognition, filled only with a bewildered, profound shock.

The crowd surged toward the door, a laughing, crying, shouting tidal wave of nostalgia and joy. They spilled out into the sunlight, forming a bustling, cheering semicircle in the yard.

Hina and Shojin, moving as if in separate trances, were swept along. Hina pushed through bodies with quiet desperation. Shojin just got carried by the current, his feet moving on autopilot.

Izana and his team followed to the doorway, outsiders observing a sacred reunion. Kokan and Kurohana joined them, their faces mirrors of confused wonder.

Outside, standing before the guild's worn sign, was a man.

He was tall, with a lean, relaxed posture that suggested he could stand there for a century and be comfortable. His hair was a deep, windswept crimson-black, like embers in shadow. He wore a long, dusty traveler's cloak, frayed at the edges from countless roads. A simple, worn pendant—a teardrop of crimson Sylax crystal—rested against his chest.

But it was his face that held them. He had a warm, lazy half-smile on his lips, and eyes the color of molten gold. They looked sleepy, amused, and saw absolutely everything. He gazed up at the guild name, his smile softening with a decade's worth of quiet feeling.

He pushed the door open—the crowd inside having emptied out—and stepped into the hall.

The cheers redoubled, echoing off the rafters as everyone poured back in, surrounding him. He was engulfed in a storm of backslaps, bear hugs, and shouted questions.

"STORMHART! YOU OLD DOG!"
"THE HUNDRED-YEAR QUEST!DID YOU FINISH IT OR JUST GET BORED?"
"TEN YEARS!WHERE'S MY SOUVENIR?"
"YOU HAVEN'T AGED A DAY,YOU LUCKY BASTARD!"

Through the press of bodies, Hina finally broke through. She stood at the inner edge of the circle, trembling, her fists clenched at her sides. The tear she'd wiped away was replaced by

others she couldn't stop. "You're… finally back," she whispered, the words lost in the roar.

Shojin reached the crowd's edge opposite her. He just stared, his usual fire completely extinguished, replaced by a hollow, stunned silence. "It's really him," he breathed, the words soundless.

Izana watched it all, his mind racing. Who is he? Why does his return break Hina and freeze Shojin? Why does his presence feel like the missing piece the guild was waiting for?

From the upstairs balcony, a grumpy, sleep-roughened voice cut through the celebration. "OI. I was taking a nap."

The crowd quieted, parting slightly. Scarlett stood at the railing, her raven-black hair mussed, her crimson eyes narrowed in mock annoyance.

Arvel Stormhart looked up. His easy smile didn't fade; it just gained a layer of deep, familiar affection. He raised a hand in a casual, apologetic wave. "Sorry, Master. Didn't mean to interrupt the beauty sleep."

When Scarlett saw him, the grumpy mask slipped for a fraction of a second. Something old and warm flashed in her crimson gaze—pride, relief, a shared history. Then the smirk returned, wider and more genuine. "Oi, Stormy. Took you long enough."

"Yeah, Master," he said, his voice a calm, steady rumble that somehow carried to every corner. "I'm back. It's been ten years."

"Ten years," Scarlett echoed, leaning on the railing. "You were on a hundred-year quest. Don't tell me you got bored and quit halfway?"

Arvel chuckled, a rich, easy sound that seemed to lower the room's frantic energy by several degrees. "Nah. Finished it."

A new, louder wave of cheers and whistles erupted. "HE FINISHED IT!" "A HUNDRED-YEAR QUEST IN A DECADE!" "THAT'S OUR STORMHART!"

Kokan, Kurohana, and the entire Winslow team felt their understanding of the world tilt. A hundred-year quest… completed in ten years? The sheer, impossible scale of it was staggering. This wasn't just a returning member. This was a force of nature coming home.

Leon and Sora squeezed through the crowd, reaching Arvel first. "Stormhart!" they yelled in unison.

Arvel looked down at them, his golden eyes crinkling. He reached out and ruffled their hair. "Hey there, kids."

Leon and Sora sputtered, their faces turning red with indignation. "KIDS?! WE'RE NOT KIDS!" Leon yelled. "I'M LEON! HE'S SORA! WE'RE FULL MEMBERS!"

“Yeah! You taught me my first reverse-parry!” Sora added, punching Arvel’s arm lightly.

Arvel’s smile turned teasing. “Did I? Huh. You’ve both gotten big.” His gaze then shifted as Mio stepped forward, giving a small, respectful bow.

“Welcome back, Stormhart-san.”

Arvel’s eyes softened. A memory seemed to click. He pointed at her, the picture of a toddler with silver hair clear in his mind. “Mio… Amatsuki. You used to hide behind your mother’s legs. Look at you.”

Leon and Sora exploded. “HE REMEMBERS HER BUT NOT US?!” The crowd howled with laughter.

As more adventurers swarmed him with stories and questions, the scene became pure, beautiful chaos. Through it all, Arvel remained the calm center—accepting hugs, returning jokes, his presence alone seeming to validate the guild’s heightened energy.

Scarlett watched from above, her smirk now a genuine smile of satisfaction.

At the periphery, the newcomers tried to process it all. Izana’s eyes kept darting to Hina, who had sunk to sit on the floor by the wall, her face buried in her hands, shoulders shaking silently. And to Shojin, who leaned against the doorframe as if needing its support, his gaze still glued to Arvel with an expression of someone who’d seen a ghost—a beloved, shocking ghost.

“Who… is he?” Renard finally voiced the question hanging over them all.

Kokan shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. But he’s not just a legend. He’s their legend. And his return… it feels like the reason the quest board is full. No one would take a quest, because on some level, they were all waiting for him to come home.”

The mystery deepened, woven into the fabric of the guild’s joy. Why did his return crack Hina open? Why did it shut Shojin down? What was the storm they were all waiting for? And what did the completion of a century-long quest in a single decade herald for Sylax?

The questions hung thick in the air, unanswered, as the untamed guild celebrated the return of its heart.

Flashback – The Moonlit Lake

Silver light on dark water. The whisper of waves on sand. A man sat alone, the twin moons painting his silhouette in shades of blue and grey. A bottle dangled from his fingers.

He took a long, final swig, his golden eyes reflecting the celestial bodies above. A decade of

roads, battles, and silent watches was etched into the calm lines of his face. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a pendant—a simple leather cord, a teardrop of crimson crystal. The Sylax symbol within glowed softly, a tiny hearth-fire against the vast night.

He held it tight, his thumb stroking the smooth surface. Not with regret. With resolve. The quiet before the return.

“Time to go home,” Arvel Stormhart murmured to the listening lake. “The calm’s about to break.”

He stood, slipped the pendant over his head, feeling its familiar weight settle against his chest—a promise, a loyalty, a belonging. Then he turned his back on the tranquil water and walked into the dark woods, his path leading unerringly toward the chaos, the family, and the coming storm that was Sylax.

Chapter 58: Preparations in Oakhaven

The chaos had breached the guild walls. It was no longer contained to Sylax; it had spilled out into the very streets of Oakhaven, dyeing the tranquil town in vibrant, noisy hues.

Izana, Reina, Renard, and Riku wrestled a heavy barrel of pickled herring (James's "specialty") through the bustling market square. But their mission was forgotten, drowned in the sensory overload around them.

Everywhere, citizens and adventurers worked in organized pandemonium. Ladders leaned against every building. Garlands of autumn leaves and glowing, enchanted berries were being strung between eaves. Children darted underfoot, waving streamers and wooden swords, pretending to slay imaginary beasts between the stalls. Hammers rang as temporary stages were erected in the square. The air smelled of sawdust, spiced cider, and the ozone-tang of minor illusion magic.

"What… is this?" Riku whispered, his head swiveling like an owl's. "Did chaos become contagious? Is it a town-wide… condition?"

Renard, ever serious, scanned the scene with a tactical eye. "It's coordinated. But the coordination is… festive. Look at the rope teams—half are tying proper knots, the other half are trying to braid the ropes with flowers."

Reina nodded, her analytical mind struggling with the variables. "The emotional output is inefficient but widespread. A shared objective is clearly driving this energy expenditure."

Izana barely heard them. His mind was a loop: Hina. It had been a day since the legendary return. A day since he'd seen her crumble to the floor, tears cutting through her usual armor. She'd been a ghost since—quiet, distant, helping with preparations but moving like she was in a dream. The sight of it gnawed at him, a mystery more urgent than any royal decree.

They finally deposited the barrel at a harassed-looking grocer's stall. The shopkeeper, a plump woman with flour in her hair, sighed with relief. "Bless you, dears. It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said, gesturing at the whirlwind around them. "Though my ears may never recover."

Riku seized the opening. "What is happening? Is it a holiday? A mass… cheerful hysteria?"

The woman chuckled, wiping her hands on her apron. "Oh, this? This is the Preparation. For Oaklight."

Izana pulled his focus back to the mission. "Oaklight? We're… new. What is it?"

Before the shopkeeper could answer, a crate of glowing pumpkins floated past, guided by a grinning mage and three children giving contradictory, loud directions. The moment was lost in the noise.

The Training Ground – A Lesson in Remembering

Scarlett hung upside down from her favorite oak branch by her knees, a half-eaten apple in hand, observing her three “headaches” with bored crimson eyes. Their forms were off. Their focus was scattered. The usual determined fire in Kurohana’s strikes was dim. Kokan’s water wavered. Shojin’s flames sputtered like a damp match.

On the sidelines, Arvel Stormhart leaned against the fence next to Kael Hoshigami. He took a slow drink from a waterskin, his golden eyes missing nothing.

“Master’s apprentices, huh?” Arvel mused, a lazy smirk on his face. “They look more like walking migraines than students.”

Kael’s wise eyes crinkled. “They have their days. Today is not one of them.”

Arvel’s gaze lingered on Kurohana, on the faint, carefully banked ember of power she couldn’t fully hide. “The girl… that’s demonic energy. Pure, high-grade. How’s she breathing our air without setting the sky on fire?”

Kael’s smile was knowing. “You are still sharp. She is the daughter of the previous Fire Demon Lord. As for the ‘how’… that is a question only Master Scarlett holds the answer to.”

Arvel chuckled, a low, warm sound. “So Master’s still collecting impossible things. Should’ve guessed.” His gaze swept over Shojin, who was staring at a tree as if it held the secrets of the universe. “And the sunny one? He looks like he’s seen a ghost. My ghost, specifically.”

Before Kael could reply, Scarlett dropped from the branch, landing without a sound between her distracted apprentices. She took a final, loud crunch of her apple and tossed the core over her shoulder, where it bounced off Hayate’s snoring forehead. He grunted and rolled over.

“Clap,” Scarlett said, her voice flat.

They flinched and stopped, turning to her.

“Why,” she began, pacing slowly in front of them, “are you three looking more lost than a goblin in a library? I am gifting you my precious, irreplaceable napping time, and your focus is on… what? The fascinating grain of the wood? The philosophical depth of your own elbows?”

They bowed in unison. “Sorry, Master,” Kokan said.

Scarlett sighed, a sound of profound suffering, and leaned back against the oak tree. “Spill. Now. What’s clattering around in those noisy skulls?”

Kokan spoke first, his voice calm but laced with genuine curiosity. “Master, the guild’s quest board is untouched. Piled high. Yet no one takes them. The energy in the guild, in the whole town… it’s heightened, but it’s not directed at adventure. It’s directed… inward. And adventurers we’ve never seen are returning. Why?”

Kurohana added, her voice softer, “And that man… Arvel Stormhart. Who is he? How does one complete a century-spanning S-rank quest in a single decade? What does his return mean?”

Shojin stayed silent, staring at his feet.

Scarlett looked at them, then her gaze drifted past them to the bustling town visible over the fence. For a long moment, she was quiet. When she spoke again, the grumpy edge was still there, but underneath it was something older, heavier.

“So you’re wondering why the quest board looks like a paper graveyard and why everyone’s acting like they chugged liquid chaos for breakfast.” She pushed off the tree. “Congratulations. You arrived just in time for Oakhaven’s annual reminder.”

She walked a few steps, her back to them, hands in her pockets. “Oaklight isn’t a holiday. It’s a debt. A loud, messy, beautiful debt.”

She turned, her crimson eyes holding them. “Once a year, this town, and this guild, stops pretending that the next quest, the next rank, the next monster, is the most important thing in the world. We remember the idiots who ran toward the danger first, laughed the loudest, and were too stupid or too brave to come back. Sylax adventurers. Oakhaven farmers. The brave, the foolish, the kind.”

“Names get written on lanterns,” she continued, her voice dropping. “Hundreds of them. The old oak spirits in the grove—older than this kingdom, older than your grandest ambitions—they wake up a little. They remember too. They glow. And we send the lanterns up. The sky gets so crowded with light and memory, you’d think the stars are jealous.”

She pointed a thumb back toward the guild. “Why no quests? Because even lunatics like us need to stop. Breathe. Remember who we’re fighting for. The monsters will still be there tomorrow. The dead won’t.”

She gestured at the noise from the town square—the laughter, the shouting, the life. “The chaos? The food fights? The kids swinging sticks and dreaming of being legends? That’s the point. Oaklight isn’t about sitting quietly and being sad. It’s a rebellion. It’s screaming at the universe that the people we lost didn’t die for a quiet, boring world. They died for this.” She meant the noise, the mess, the sheer, stubborn joy.

“Energy’s high,” she finished, her smirk returning, “because we’re all still here. Sarcasm’s sharper because laughing leaves less room for crying. So put your questions away. Grab a lantern. Help hang a banner. For these few days, the only quest is to be alive, loudly.”

She then fixed them with a look. “As for Stormhart…” She shook her head, as if the very thought was exhausting. “That idiot. He’s the story other guilds tell in whispers to scare their recruits. The guy who naps through apocalypses and wins with a yawn. He finished a hundred-year quest in ten years because the rules of time are apparently just polite suggestions to him. He’s chaos wrapped in calm, a disaster who makes everything okay. If he says ‘don’t worry,’ you stop worrying. It’s infuriating.”

“Now,” she clapped her hands once, the lesson over. “Stop being distractions. Go be useful. And Shojin,” she added, her voice softening a fraction. “Talk to him. You look like you’ve seen a ghost. His ghost.”

The Barrel’s Edge – A Hero’s Return

Later, as the sun began to dip, painting the training ground in orange and long shadows, Arvel sat on the ground, his back against the fence, sipping from a flask. The sounds of preparation were a distant, cheerful orchestra.

Shojin approached him, his steps uncharacteristically hesitant. He stopped a few feet away. “Hey.”

Arvel looked up, his golden eyes warm. He didn’t recognize the young man, but he saw the guild pendant and the familiar, chaotic energy barely contained. He patted the grass beside him. “Hey yourself. Sit. You look like you’re carrying the world.”

Shojin sat, folding his legs. He was silent for a long moment, staring at his own hands. Then he blurted it out, the question that had frozen him solid the day before. “Are you… really Arvel Stormhart?”

Arvel chuckled. “Last time I checked. Why? Do I owe you money?”

“No, it’s just…” Shojin took a deep breath, his usual fire bursting through in a rush of words. “I can’t believe I’m meeting you again! I mean, you’re here! It’s really you!”

Arvel’s easy smile remained, but a flicker of curiosity entered his eyes. “Again? Sorry, kid, my memory’s a bit cluttered with decades of bad decisions. Help me out. When did we meet?”

The story tumbled out of Shojin, not with words, but with the desperate hope in his emerald eyes. It triggered a ripple in Arvel’s mind. A dusty road. A screaming child. Not a memory of a face, but a feeling—a tiny, tornado of energy and fearless joy.

A flashback, vivid and warm, washed over Arvel:

The Estarian forest, years ago. The air smelled of pine and damp earth. He and Laurence were on their way back to Sylax, bickering about the best way to cook river trout, when a

high-pitched, furious scream cut through the woods—not of fear, but of sheer, indignant rage.

They moved as one, two blurs through the trees. In a small clearing, a toddler with wild, sun-bright hair was standing his ground against a snarling, wolf-like Gnasher, waving a stick twice his size. “GO AWAY! YOU’RE UGLY AND YOU SMELL!” the toddler yelled.

Laurence snorted a laugh even as he drew his blade. Arvel was already moving. The “fight” lasted two seconds. A flash of steel, a muffled yelp from the beast, and it was gone, fleeing into the undergrowth.

The toddler blinked, dropped his stick, and looked up at them with eyes like shiny emeralds, all traces of anger replaced by instant, awe-struck hero worship. “WHOAA! THAT WAS SO COOL!”

Laurence sheathed his sword, grinning. “You’ve got spirit, pipsqueak. What are you doing out here?”

“Me and Daddy are finding mushrooms!” the boy declared proudly, then his face fell into adorable despair. “But Daddy got lost.”

Arvel and Laurence exchanged a look before bursting into laughter. “Kid,” Arvel said, kneeling, “I think you’re the one who got lost.”

“No! Daddy has to hold my hand! He let go! So he’s lost!”

They laughed harder. They calmed the boy—Shojin Takeru, he announced with dramatic flair—and tried to find his father as dusk fell. Failing that, they settled in a dry cave, lighting a small fire. The boy, sandwiched between the two adventurers, swung from worry for his “lost” daddy to boundless curiosity.

“What do you wanna be when you grow up, kiddo?” Laurence asked, trying to distract him.

Shojin tapped his chin seriously. “Ummm… I don’t know.”

“C’mon, anything!” Arvel nudged him playfully.

“I said I don’t know!” he pouted, then his eyes narrowed. “What do YOU do? What’s your name?”

Laurence chuckled. “Right, manners. I’m Laurence Davis. He’s Arvel Stormhart. We’re adventurers.” They pulled out their pendants—the crimson Sylax crystals glowing in the firelight.

Shojin’s eyes went as round as the moons. “SYLAXXX! WOW!”

He eventually fell asleep leaning against Arvel, a tiny furnace of trust. The next day, they found Anderson Takeru—a man with the same chaotic energy as his son, frantically searching. The reunion was a blur of grateful bows and Shojin trying to explain, in a jumbled rush, how the “cool adventurers” beat the “smelly monster.”

As they turned to leave, Shojin broke away from his father and sprinted back. He hugged Laurence’s leg, then Arvel’s neck when he knelt. Pulling back, his small face set with impossible seriousness, he declared, “When I get bigger, I’m gonna be an adventurer! Like you!”

Arvel ruffled his hair. “Yeah?”

“AND I’M GONNA JOIN SYLAX AND BECOME THE WORLD’S GREATEST ADVENTURER!”

The vow, shouted with all the conviction in his tiny lungs, echoed in the clearing. Laurence and Arvel laughed, touched. “Alright then, little one,” Arvel said. “We’ll be waiting for you.”

The memory faded. Arvel stared at the young man beside him—the same emerald eyes, the same sun-bright hair, the same unshakeable spirit, just… taller. The name clicked into place with a soft, resonant thud.

He didn’t need Shojin to say another word. A slow, amazed, deeply moved smile spread across Arvel’s face. He reached out and placed a hand on Shojin’s shoulder.

“Shojin Takeru,” he said, his voice thick with a warmth that surprised even him. “You chaotic little miracle. You actually did it. You really came.”

Shojin’s breath hitched. All the shock of the previous day melted, replaced by a radiant, disbelieving joy. “You remember!”

“How could I forget the tiny hurricane who declared war on a Gnasher with a stick?” Arvel laughed, pulling him into a brief, firm hug. “You’ve grown. A lot.”

As they pulled apart, Shojin’s joy was suddenly shadowed. He looked around, as if just realizing someone was missing. “Arvel… where’s Laurence? I haven’t seen him since I joined. Is he… on a long quest too?”

The easy light in Arvel’s golden eyes didn’t vanish, but it dimmed, softened by years of carrying the weight. The smile on his lips turned bittersweet. “Oh, kid,” he said softly. “Laurence… he fell. Years ago. On a quest that wasn’t nearly as grand as a hundred-year one. Just a stupid, lucky goblin ambush.” He saw the devastation crash over Shojin’s face—the loss of a hero he’d only met once, but who had shaped his dream.

Arvel’s arm went around Shojin’s shoulders again, a steadying weight. “But listen to me. If he could see you now? Sitting here, wearing that pendant, having made it all the way to Sylax? He’d be the proudest, most insufferable braggart in the seven realms. He’d never shut up

about ‘that amazing kid we met in the woods.’ I’m happy you’re here, Shojin. Truly.”

Tears Shojin didn’t know he had welled up, but he smiled through them, a wobbly, fierce thing. The legend wasn’t just a story. He was a man who remembered, who carried losses, and whose approval felt like the sun coming out.

A Window, A Whisper, A Secret

From her bedroom window in the guild hall, Hina watched the scene below. She saw Arvel’s laugh, saw him pull Shojin into that hug. Her own tears, held in check for a day, finally broke free, tracing silent paths down her cheeks.

She wasn’t sad. It was a profound, aching relief, mixed with a grief so old it had become part of her bones.

“You came back,” she whispered to the empty room, her voice cracking. “You’re really alive.” She pressed her forehead against the cool glass, her breath fogging it. A secret, held close to her heart for a decade, trembled on her lips, but she swallowed it back down. The time for that wasn’t now. Now was for Oaklight. For remembrance. For the living.

As twilight deepened, the preparations hit a frenzied, hilarious peak.

In the town square, Yudai and Hayate were in charge of the main bonfire stack. It had, through a series of misunderstandings and competitive instincts, become a towering, precarious piece of architectural madness that looked ready to topple and take a bakery with it.

“It’s art!” Hayate insisted, balancing a final, comically large log on top.
“It’s a death trap!”Reina called out from a safe distance, her face pale.
“SAME THING!”several Sylax members chorused.

Mio and several Celestia Pact members were carefully inscribing names onto paper lanterns with brushes of glowing ink. Mio’s hand was steady, her expression solemn, until Shojin bounded over, now buzzing with a new, healed energy.
“You need help?I can write! I’ll write ‘FOOD’ on all of them!”
“Shojin,no!”

Leon, bandages still on, was directing a group of children in painting a massive banner that read “WELCOME HOME & REMEMBER”. It currently read “WLCM HME & RMEMR BR” due to paint-related incidents and Leon’s… abstract sense of spelling.

Isamu had finally given up on direct flirting and was “helping” Akira by holding a ladder. He was holding it at such a deliberately unstable angle while offering “stabilizing tips” that she finally poured a small vial of harmless but vividly purple dye on his head from above.
“Oops,”she said, not sounding sorry at all. The guild cheered.

Kokan and Kurohana found themselves stringing up lines of enchanted crystals that pulsed with soft light. They worked in comfortable silence, the earlier tension replaced by a shared purpose.
“For the lost,”Kurohana murmured, hanging a crystal.
“And for those still here,”Kokan replied, his hand briefly brushing hers as he reached for the next one.

Izana and his team were roped into carrying benches. Izana’s eyes kept finding Hina, who was now on a rooftop with Sora, securing a huge Sylax flag. She was laughing at something Sora said, the first real laugh he’d seen from her in days. The sight eased something in his chest, even as the mystery of her connection to Stormhart deepened.

Arvel Stormhart moved through it all like a calm current in a stormy sea. He’d right a teetering pile of chairs with a nudge, offer a quiet word that made a frustrated crafter laugh, help a child reach a high branch to hang a garland. His presence didn’t diminish the chaos; it grounded it. He was the living proof of what they were celebrating—the legend who returned, the survivor who remembered.

As full night fell, the work was done. Oakhaven and Sylax stood transformed, decked in light and memory, ready for the solemn, joyous rebellion of Oaklight to begin. The quest board remained full, a silent promise of tomorrow’s dangers. But for tonight, the only mission was to remember, to celebrate, and to be, gloriously, untamed together.

Chapter 59: Beneath the Unlit Lanterns

The air in Oakhaven crackled with a different kind of magic on the eve of Oaklight. It wasn't the quiet awe of the ancient oaks or the solemnity of remembrance—not yet. This was the roaring, messy, glorious prelude. The festival hadn't officially begun, but the celebration of being alive was already in full, chaotic swing.

The narrow streets were rivers of light and sound. Makeshift stalls lined every lane, selling everything from sizzling roasted nuts and magical candies that changed flavor in your mouth, to carved oak spirit charms and ridiculously ornate toy swords. Tourists and travelers mixed with townsfolk, their eyes wide with wonder at the untamed spectacle. Adventurers from Sylax were everywhere, not as guards, but as catalysts for the fun.

In the main square, a game of "Pin the Tail on the Wyvern" had devolved into a friendly, full-contact brawl involving three off-duty knights, a giggling child, and Leon—who was trying to "help" by blindfolding everyone with his bandages.

"LEFT! YOUR OTHER LEFT!" Leon shouted dramatically as a burly warrior staggered directly into a pile of empty barrels.

Nearby, a group of minstrels tried to play a heroic ballad, but kept being drowned out by Shojin's enthusiastic, atonal singing from a nearby food stall.

"AND HE FOUGHT THE DRAGON WITH A SPOON! A SHINY, SOUPY SPOOOOON!"

Kokan, standing beside him, winced slightly but held two sticks of absurdly large, pink cotton candy. He scanned the crowd, a faint frown on his face.

"She hasn't come yet," he murmured.

Shojin, his mouth already stained blue from a powdered-sugar dragon, followed his gaze. "Who? Kuro? She's probably at the dagger-throwing stall. Or maybe she found a quiet spot to brood heroically. It's her aesthetic." He then pointed at the cotton candy in Kokan's hands. "One's for her, right?"

Kokan looked down at the second pink cloud, then back at Shojin's knowing, sugar-crusted grin. A faint, almost imperceptible blush touched his cheeks. "It… seemed wasteful to only buy one."

"SURE IT DID!" Shojin bellowed, slapping his back and nearly making him drop the treats. "C'mon, let's go find her! She can't miss the pre-festival festival!"

At a ring-toss game, Reina and Renard stood in line. Reina's posture was rigid, her eyes analyzing the physics of each throw, the wind speed, the weight of the rings.

“The probability of success with a side-arm toss is 18% higher than an overhand,” she stated to the man in front of her, who looked terrified.

Renard, meanwhile, was gazing around, his brow furrowed. “Where’s Izana? He said he’d meet us by the mead stall.”

Reina didn’t look away from the game. “He is with Hina.”

“With Hina? Why? Did she need help with a festival setup? A tactical analysis of lantern distribution?”

Reina finally turned her head, giving him a look so flat it could have leveled a mountain. “Renard. You are a brilliant warrior and a loyal friend. But you are, and I say this with all strategic honesty, the densest man in seven kingdoms.”

“What? What did I do now?” Renard asked, genuinely bewildered, as Reina shook her head and marched toward the tossing line.

Near a jewelry stall, Isamu of the Crimson Fangs was engaged in critical reconnaissance. He held up two necklaces—one a delicate silver chain with a tiny oak leaf, the other a chunkier piece with a glowing amber stone.

“Oi, Lura,” he said to the long-suffering stall keeper, a woman with arms covered in intricate tattoos. “Be honest. Which one says ‘I respect your professional boundaries but also your eyes are like starlight trapped in a storm’?”

Lura didn’t look up from polishing a brooch. “The one that comes with a free helmet to protect you from the slap she’s going to give you. Honestly, Isamu, both would look lovely on Akira-san. And so would the handprint of her rejection on your cheek. Now buy something or move, you’re scaring the paying customers.”

Elsewhere, Hayate was surrounded by a pack of children, using his massive warhammer to (very carefully) launch apples into a distant basket for a game. Each successful "THWACK" was met with delirious cheers. Leon had been dragged into storytelling duty by a group of wide-eyed tourists, his tale growing more outrageous by the minute.

“…and so I said to the Sea Serpent, ‘My dear, if you’re going to swallow me, at least offer a digestif!’ And it was so offended by my critique of its culinary manners, it spat me back onto the shore along with three treasure chests and a complimentary seashell!”

Pino was engaged in a high-stakes chase with a grumpy-looking orange tabby, her tiny legs a blur. “Oi! Fluffy! Come back! I just want to boop your nose!” The cat’s expression clearly conveyed it was re-evaluating its life choices.

And in the midst of it all, on a quiet bench under a glowing lantern string, sat Scarlett. She wasn’t alone. Surrounding her were the elders of Oakhaven—men and women with faces lined like oak bark, eyes full of quiet wisdom and mild amusement. They passed a steaming

flask between them, sharing stories in low voices. Scarlett listened, her usual grumpy expression softened into something approaching peace. She belonged here, in this calm eye of the festive storm.

But one person was not enjoying the chaos.

Izana's heart was a trapped bird beating against his ribs. He'd circled the main square twice, pushed through bustling side streets, checked the food stalls, the game alleys, even the temporary stage. No Hina.

The mission—reports, intelligence, the weakening barrier—felt like a distant, faded script. All that mattered was the look on her face when Arvel Stormhart had returned. The shattered silence that had followed her for a day. The mission was a phantom; her pain was a real, sharp stone in his gut.

She could be hurt. She could be… He cut the thought off, a prince's calm forcibly overriding a more primal worry. She's strong. She's Hina. But even the strongest walls have cracks.

He made a decision. The guild hall. It was the only place left.

The great hall of Sylax was a cavern of eerie quiet, a stark contrast to the roaring life outside. The dying fire in the hearth cast long, dancing shadows over the empty tables and chairs. The only sound was the soft scratch-scratch of a quill.

Akira looked up from the reception desk, a mountain of finalized forms beside her. "Oh. Izana. Everything alright? The festival's about to start. Shouldn't you be out there… enjoying the organized chaos?" Even her professional tone held a note of curiosity.

Izana forced a casual smile. It felt brittle. "Yeah. Just… forgot something. What are you still doing here?"

"Winding up," she said, capping her inkwell. "Someone has to make sure the guild doesn't legally cease to exist because we were all too busy celebrating. Are you sure you're—"

"I'm fine," he said, too quickly. "Just… fetching something."

He didn't wait for another question. He moved through the silent hall, his boots echoing. He checked the library nook—empty. He peered into the kitchen—dark and still. He even stood outside the door to the female dormitory hallway, feeling like an intruder, before calling her name softly. No answer.

A cold tendril of fear, sharp and entirely non-regal, wrapped around his spine. He walked to a large window overlooking the back training ground, leaning his forehead against the cool glass with a sigh.

And there she was.

A single figure, sitting at the base of the great, ancient oak tree in the middle of the training ground. The oak whose branches would soon hold hundreds of glowing lanterns. It was Hina. Her back was to him, her posture small and curled in on itself.

Relief flooded him, so intense it was dizzying, followed immediately by a deeper concern. Without another thought, he turned and half-ran down the stairs and out the back door.

The training ground was a pool of deep twilight shadow, insulated from the festival's noise by the guild hall. The only light came from the first few lanterns being tested in the town beyond, casting a faint, colored glow on the grass. The air was cold, smelling of damp earth and impending ceremony.

He crossed the distance, his approach silent. When he was a few feet away, he forced himself to slow, to adopt a casual air he didn't feel. He raised a hand in a wave.

"Hey."

Hina turned. In the dim light, her face was pale, her eyes wide and strangely hollow. She managed a weak semblance of her usual smirk. "Hey. I thought you'd be knee-deep in festival nonsense by now."

Izana ran a hand through his hair, the picture of relaxed coincidence. "Yeah, I was. Just… forgot something. What about you? Shouldn't you be out there bossing everyone around?"

She turned back to look at the dark, silent oak. "Nah. Not really in the mood."

He took a step closer. "So… let's go get in the mood. Together." He reached out, intending to take her hand and pull her up, to drag her back into the light and noise where she belonged.

His fingers brushed her skin. She flinched as if burned, yanking her hand back and wrapping her arms around herself. "You can go. I'm not going."

The casual act shattered. "What?" The word came out sharper than he intended.

He didn't wait for another deflection. In two strides he was in front of her. He placed his hands on her shoulders, firm but not harsh, and turned her to face him fully. In the gloom, he could see the tracks of dried tears on her cheeks, the raw redness around her eyes.

"Hina," he said, his voice dropping, all pretense gone. "What happened to you? You've been acting weird since the day Stormhart came back. I've never seen you like this." The words tumbled out, worry overriding caution. "I—I mean, everyone is worried about you. Sora, Mio, Kael, Master Scarlett… they've all noticed. What is it? If it's about him, if he did something—" A flicker of something dark and protective, utterly un-princely, sparked in his emerald eyes.

Hina pushed against his chest, but there was no real strength in it. "Thanks," she breathed, the word shaky. Then, louder, forced: "Now please, leave me alone. You're being annoying."

“I’m not going anywhere.” His grip on her shoulders tightened slightly, an anchor. “I’ll stay right here and be annoying until you tell me.” His voice dipped to a whisper, meant only for her, pleading. “Please.”

He searched her face. “What is it about? Stormhart? Something else? I’m here. Please.”

The last of her resistance crumbled. Her shoulders slumped under his hands. A strange, wobbly smile touched her lips—a sad, broken thing. A single tear escaped, then another, tracing new paths through the old ones.

“Thank you,” she whispered, the words laced with a grief so profound it stole his breath. “For worrying about me like that.”

He froze, the angry protector in him dissolving into confusion. “Hina… what are you saying?”

She looked at him then, truly looked at him, and he saw not the brilliant, sarcastic strategist, but a lost, heartbroken girl.

“The old, stupid man,” she said, her voice cracking on a soft, hysterical laugh. “Is my father.”

The world stopped. The distant festival sounds faded to nothing. The cold air seemed to solidify around them.

“Arvel Stormhart,” she continued, the name a prayer and a curse. “The living legend. The man the whole world whispers about.” A sob hitched in her chest. “And he doesn’t even know I exist.”

Izana didn’t speak. He didn’t offer hollow platitudes or ask for explanations. Every instinct drilled into him—to analyze, to strategize, to report—evaporated. There was only her, and the devastating truth she’d carried alone.

He closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms.

It wasn’t a romantic embrace. It was shelter. It was a bulwark against the storm of her grief. He held her tightly, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other a firm band across her back, as if he could physically hold the pieces of her together.

Hina collapsed into him, her fists clutching the fabric of his shirt. Years of held-back tears, of silent watching, of desperate, hidden hope, broke free in ragged, wrenching sobs that shook her entire frame.

“He… he didn’t even know,” she gasped into his chest, the words muffled and wet. “Who am I to him? He’s… he’s so stupid.”
Izana just held her,his chin resting on the top of her head, his own heart aching with a foreign, fierce empathy.

“I wanted to tell him… I joined the guild to see him… to meet him… to finally say it,” she

cried, the confession torn from her. “But I couldn’t. I was too scared. Every time he was around, I’d just… watch. And then he left. On that stupid, impossible hundred-year quest. I thought… I thought I’d never get the chance. That I’d die with him never knowing.”

She trembled violently. “He’s stupid. So, so stupid… And I’m worse. I’m a coward.”

“You’re not,” Izana murmured into her hair, his voice a low, steady vibration against her. “You’re not stupid, and you’re not a coward. You’re his daughter.”

The words, simple and absolute, seemed to calm the tempest slightly. She cried quieter now, the tears slowing from a torrent to a stream.

“My mom… she’s gone,” Hina whispered, the pain fresh in the admission. “I just… I want him to know. Just once. I want him to see me… and know. Not as a guild member. Not as Hina the strategist. Just… as his.”

Izana finally pulled back just enough to look at her tear-streaked face. He didn’t wipe the tears away. He just looked at her, his emerald eyes holding hers with an intensity that brooked no argument. He leaned forward and gently pressed his forehead to hers, a gesture of pure, shared space.

“You deserve that,” he whispered, the words a vow. “You deserve for him to know. You are his daughter. And he will see you.”

The simple, unwavering belief in his voice was a balm. For the first time in a decade, the lonely, hidden part of her felt seen, not as a secret to be kept, but as a truth deserving of light.

They stood like that for a long moment, in the quiet dark beneath the unlit lantern tree.

A soft rustle, like leaves disturbed, came from behind the massive trunk.

Both Izana and Hina started, turning toward the sound.

From the shadows, a figure straightened up, brushing bits of grass and bark from her clothes. Kurohana stepped into the faint, colored light, her black-grey hair tousled, her crimson eyes wide with apology and lingering sleep.

“I… I am so sorry,” she said quickly, her voice hushed. “I was training here earlier… and I guess I fell asleep behind the tree. I didn’t mean to… overhear everything.” She winced, looking genuinely mortified.

Hina stared, shock momentarily overriding her tears. Izana simply sighed, a soft, exasperated sound. “Kurohana…”

“I didn’t know how to leave without interrupting,” Kurohana continued, wringing her hands. “It… didn’t feel right. I’m sorry.”

Hina let out a watery, shaky laugh, the absurdity of the situation piercing her grief. “So… you heard all of that.”

Kurohana nodded, her expression turning from embarrassed to solemn. “Yeah. I did.” She took a tentative step closer. “May I… say something? You don’t have to listen. But… please.”

Hina, still held within the circle of Izana’s arm, gave a small nod.

Kurohana’s gaze was direct, filled with a hard-won understanding. “Go to him. Tell your father. Tonight.”

Hina’s breath hitched.

“He probably won’t reject you,” Kurohana continued, her voice soft but firm. “He might be shocked. He might say all the wrong things. He might be terrible at it. But I don’t think he’ll reject you.”

She paused, and a shadow of profound pain passed through her own crimson eyes. “Please tell him before he dies.” The words hung in the cold air. “You know I lost my father. You know how it happened. I wasn’t there. I only found out… long after.” Her voice didn’t waver, but the weight in it was immense. “It broke me. That’s why I chased revenge. That’s why I pushed myself to the edge.”

She took another step, her gaze locking with Hina’s. “But your father is alive. You have time. Even one moment. Even one sentence. It matters more than you know.”

The silence that followed was heavy, but not suffocating. It was filled with the shared weight of loss and the fragile hope of prevention.

Izana remained silent, a steady presence at Hina’s side, letting Kurohana’s words, born of true pain, do their work.

Hina looked down at her own clenched fists. “…I’m scared,” she admitted, the whisper barely audible.

No one mocked her. No one rushed her. The admission hung there, respected.

Then, Kurohana’s serious expression melted into a small, encouraging smile. A spark of her own untamed spirit returned to her eyes. “Hey,” she said, her tone lighter. “Think about it. You’re a sarcastic genius. He’s the legendary, untamed soul of Sylax. This guild accepts everyone—demons, nobles, chaotic pyromaniacs, geniuses with daddy issues.” She gestured between herself, Hina, and the general direction of the festival. “You’ve been here since you were six. This is your family. Me? I’m the new one, and even I feel it.”

She nudged Hina’s foot gently with her own. “So go. I’m telling you, go. Before you lose the chance. Go tell him. Beneath these unlit lanterns… you have to go.”

The poetic turn of phrase, so uncharacteristic yet perfect, seemed to strike a chord. Hina looked up at the great oak, at the empty hooks waiting for the lanterns of the remembered and the lost.

Izana's hand found her shoulder again, squeezing gently. "She's right," he said, his voice quiet but solid as bedrock. "Don't worry. I've got your back, Hina. Go. Tell him beneath these unlit lanterns. Before the festival begins. Before another moment slips away."

Hina looked from Kurohana's earnest face to Izana's steadfast one. She looked at the tree, a symbol of memory, and thought of her father, a living legend who was just a man. The fear was still there, a cold knot in her stomach. But beneath it, fanned by their belief, a spark of courage—fierce, desperate, and entirely her own—finally caught flame.

She took a deep, shuddering breath, the cold air filling her lungs with resolve.

She had to go.
She would go.
Before the lanterns were lit and the memories took flight,she would claim her own.

Back in the swirling, joyful chaos of the pre-festival, life continued, blissfully unaware of the quiet drama in the dark training ground.

Shojin, now with blue and pink sugar on his face, waved a glowing toy sword. "TO THE PIE-EATING CONTEST! VICTORY AWAITS!"
Kokan followed,still holding the two cotton candies, a quiet smile on his lips as he finally spotted a familiar figure with dark hair examining a display of throwing knives.

Reina hit three ring-tosses in a row with mechanical precision, winning a stuffed wyvern. She thrust it into Renard's arms. "For your tactical education. Its fluffiness represents the unpredictable variable."

Lura the stall keeper finally sold Isamu the oak leaf necklace, saying, "Good luck. You'll need it."

And Scarlett, sharing a quiet laugh with the elders, gazed up at the first real stars beginning to pierce the twilight, a contented smirk on her face. The night was young. The festival was about to begin. And somewhere in the beating heart of it all, the untamed bonds of Sylax were being tested and strengthened in ways no one could yet see.

Chapter 60: The Storm That Loved the Light

The air in Oakhaven didn't just buzz with anticipation—it sang with it. The final hours before the Oaklight lantern ceremony were a masterclass in controlled, joyful anarchy. The entire town was a living entity, breathing in time with the heartbeat of Sylax.

Shojin and Kokan moved through the vibrant chaos like a pair of complementary disasters. Shojin was a golden, sticky comet, drawn to every game stall and food cart. Kokan was his calm, long-suffering shadow, holding purchases and occasionally pulling him back from the brink of causing international incidents.

"Look! They have flame-grilled dragon skewers! Well, probably just spicy pork, but STILL!" Shojin yelled, pointing.

"The statistical probability of it being actual dragon is less than zero," Kokan intoned, but he was smiling, a rare, relaxed expression on his face. This was his first Oaklight, his first festival that wasn't a stifling noble event of whispered politics and rigid dances. The noise, the mess, the sheer life of it was intoxicating.

"Hey! Guys! I found you!"

The voice cut through the din. They turned to see Kurohana weaving through the crowd toward them, her black-grey hair slightly windswept, her crimson eyes bright. She looked relieved.

Shojin beamed and snatched one of the two pink cotton candies Kokan was holding. He charged toward her, thrusting the sugary cloud into her hands. "Hey, Kuro! Take this! Me and Kokan got them! Yours is the pinkest!"

Kokan followed at a more sedate pace, ruffling his own hair with a sigh. "There you are. We were beginning to wonder. Please don't tell me you were in the training ground this whole time."

Kurohana took the candy, an awkward smile touching her lips. She ruffled her own hair in a mirror of his gesture. "Yeah… I was. Training. And then, uh… I fell asleep. Sorry to keep you waiting."

Shojin blinked. "But I thought you'd be playing the knife-throwing game! Or the strength hammer! You'd be great at those!"

Kokan's stormy eyes held hers for a beat, seeing the slight redness around her eyelids, the lingering emotion she couldn't fully hide. He understood there was more to the story. He simply nodded. "I know," he said softly, not pressing further. "Well, you're here now. And

it’s… quite an experience.”

The three of them fell into step, a little unit amidst the whirlwind. For Kurohana, this was her first festival ever. The Demon Realm did not have celebrations like this—only solemn rituals and bloody triumphs. The colorful lights, the shrieks of laughing children, the overwhelming sense of communal joy was alien and beautiful. She watched a group of kids chase each other with glowing wooden swords, their imaginations painting them as legendary heroes.

“It’s… loud,” she said, not disapprovingly, but in awe.

“It’s Sylax,” Shojin declared, as if that explained everything. And in a way, it did.

Elsewhere in the swirling tide, other members of the untamed family carved their own paths through the joy.

Sora of the Celestia Pact was at the center of a crowd, demonstrating a complex, utterly useless card trick that involved making three cards vanish and reappear behind the ear of a bewildered tourist. “See? The magic is in the misdirection! Or possibly in my inherent awesomeness! Jury’s still out!”

Leon, his head bandages now accessorized with a jaunty festival flower, was holding court near the bonfire stack, which now looked slightly less likely to collapse. “—and so the Hydra said, ‘Nine heads are better than one for arguing!’ And I replied, ‘Yes, but you still can’t agree on what to have for lunch!’ A classic tale of poor communication!”

Hayate had been roped into a children’s game that involved him lifting kids onto his shoulders so they could ring a high-hanging bell. His roars of mock effort were met with peals of delighted laughter.

Sakura of the Ironclaw Battalion was helping elderly townsfolk arrange seating, her veteran’s strength gentle and steady.

A boisterous dwarf named Brond was leading a drinking song with a group of off-duty miners, their voices harmonizing (poorly) with the minstrels.

Mage Alex was creating beautiful, temporary fireworks—tiny, silent bursts of colored light that danced above the crowd, drawing gasps of wonder.

Pino had finally cornered the orange tabby, not with force, but by offering it a piece of fish. She sat cross-legged, engaged in a one-sided, deeply serious conversation with the feline. “So you see, Mr. Fluffs, the strategic advantage of napping in sunbeams is vastly underrated…”

Akira, finally free from her desk, was walking with a purpose, a list in her hand. She moved with efficient grace, checking supplies, but even her professional demeanor was softened by the atmosphere. She didn’t even flinch when Isamu appeared beside her, holding out the oak leaf necklace.

“For you,” he said, uncharacteristically quiet, all his usual swagger replaced by genuine, nervous hope.

She stopped, looked at it, then at him. A slow, small, genuine smile touched her lips. She took it. “It’s… not terrible. Thank you, Isamu.” The blush on his face could have lit a lantern.

Scarlett was no longer on her bench. She stood at the edge of the great oak grove, watching the final preparations with her arms crossed. Children ran past her, and she’d occasionally reach out to stop one from tripping, or pluck a piece of leaves from another’s hair with a grumble. She was the silent, grumpy guardian of the chaos, a satisfied smirk playing on her lips.

James the chef had abandoned his kitchen to run a stall selling his infamous “Dragon Breath Chili.” Adventurers lined up to take the challenge, their faces turning progressively redder, while James laughed uproariously.

Riku of the Winslow team was in his absolute element. He’d befriended a group of Sylax rogues and was learning (and failing at) pickpocketing techniques, his laughter ringing out. Renard and Reina watched from a distance. Reina was analyzing festival security protocols with intense focus, while Renard was trying (and failing) to win a large stuffed griffin for her at a shooting gallery.

“The wind variable is inconsistent,” Reina noted.
“I think the sights are off on this,”Renard grumbled.
“Operator error is the most likely variable,”she replied flatly.

But far from the light and laughter, on the quiet, dark edge of town where a small pond reflected the first brave stars, a different scene unfolded.

Izana’s hand was gentle but firm on Hina’s back, giving her a small, steadying push. “Go on,” he whispered, his breath warm against her ear. “Good luck.” He then melted back into the shadows, taking up a position behind the wall of a nearby cottage, a silent sentry.

Hina stood frozen for a moment, her heart a wild drum against her ribs. The confident, sarcastic mask was gone. Before her, sitting on the worn stone edge of the pond, was Arvel Stormhart. He held a simple clay mug, staring into the dark water as if it held answers. The festive noise was a distant murmur here. He looked… pensive. Nostalgic.

She crumbled her courage into a tight ball in her chest and stepped forward. The gravel crunched under her boot.

Arvel’s head tilted, a predator’s casual awareness. He didn’t turn. “Hm?”

“H-hey… Stormhart,” Hina managed, her voice tighter than she wanted.

He turned then, slowly. His golden eyes, lazy and sharp, settled on her. A faint, easy smile touched his lips. “You look like you’re about to challenge me to a duel. Or confess to stealing my good socks.”

She didn’t smile back. She took another step, her back straight, fists clenched at her sides, eyes burning not with fear, but with a desperate, defiant truth.

Arvel blinked. The easy smile didn’t vanish, but it stilled. He set his mug down. “Well, I’ll be,” he said, his voice softer. “Hina, right? Sylax’s tiny genius who somehow grew up when I blinked.” There was a fondness there, the generic affection he had for all the guild’s “kids.”

“Sir,” she said, the word formal, cutting. “May I have a moment?”

The air between them shifted, grew heavier. The pond’s surface went perfectly still. Arvel straightened, just a fraction. The legend was now fully present. “Sure,” he replied, his voice losing its playful lilt. “You’ve got it.”

Hina stepped closer. The lantern light from the distant town caught in her eyes.

“I’m not here as a guild member,” she stated, each word deliberate. “I’m not here as an adventurer.”

Arvel tilted his head, curiosity now fully engaged. “Okay,” he said, the single word an open door.

Hina lifted her chin. Her hands trembled, but her gaze was unbreakable. She took the final, terrifying step.

“I am your daughter.”

Silence.

Not awkward. Not confused.

Dangerous. Deep and absolute, like the moment before a lightning strike.

Arvel stared. Then he laughed, a single, short, bewildered puff of air. “Kid… that’s a hell of a joke.”

She didn’t flinch. She stepped even closer, so close he could see the faint gold flecks in her irises, so like his own.

“Look at me,” she commanded, her voice trembling but fierce. “Not my uniform. Not my rank. My eyes.”

Arvel Stormhart stopped breathing.

His golden eyes locked onto hers. Lazy sharpness met sharp, defiant gold. A mirror. A truth he'd somehow walked past for years.

His breath hitched, a tiny, vulnerable sound he never made.

"…That's not funny," he whispered, but all the mockery was gone, replaced by a dawning, terrifying realization.

"I'm not joking." The dam broke. Words rushed out, fueled by a decade of pent-up longing. "I didn't plan a speech. I didn't rehearse it. I just know that every time someone said your name, it felt like they were talking about a piece of me I wasn't allowed to touch!"

She swallowed a sob. "I joined Sylax to see you. I trained to stand near you. I waited for you to look at me and feel something was… off."

Arvel's hand clenched slowly at his side.

"No one taught me to stand like this," she pressed on, her voice cracking. "No one taught me to fight like this. And every time I look in a mirror, I see you staring back like you forgot something important!" She was crying now, tears of anger, grief, and liberation. "See my eyes? They're yours."

The wind died. The world narrowed to the dark pond, the unlit lanterns above, and two pairs of identical golden eyes.

Arvel stared, the untamable legend, utterly disarmed. "…That's impossible," he breathed.

Then, quieter, a shattered realization: "…Unless it isn't."

His hand rose unconsciously, brushing the Sylax pendant at his chest. He laughed again, but this time it was broken, raw. "Stars above. I leave for a century and come back to this?"

Hina's voice was a wounded whisper. "Say it's not true, then. Tell me I'm wrong."

He didn't. He couldn't. The truth was written in her face, in her spirit, in the very air around her.

"So… you are my daughter," he said, the words tasting strange and wonderful. Then, curiosity, that old, familiar spark, cut through the shock. "Who… who is your mother?"

Hina opened her mouth, but he held up a hand, his mind racing through memories. "Sara?" he guessed.

Hina shook her head, a no.

"Emily?"

Another shake.

He began pacing, running a hand through his crimson-black hair, hitting his forehead lightly with his palm. “Iris? Dahlia? Alexis? Zoe? Rose…?”

“No!”

He turned toward the pond edge, gesturing dramatically. “Riza? Fizzy? Lola?!”

“NO!”

He spun, pointing a finger at her, his expression one of dramatic deduction. “I know! Sylvia! Because your gender is similar to hers!”

Hina’s frustration exploded. All the tension, the fear, the years of watching this chaotic man, erupted. She clenched her fists and shouted, her voice echoing in the quiet dark, “I FINALLY MEET MY FATHER AND I GET TO KNOW MY FATHER IS A MAN WHO DIDN’T KEEP HIS PANTS ON?!”

The shout hung in the air. She immediately deflated, stepping back, her voice dropping to a defeated whisper. “It’s the thing I only wanted to tell you. Now my work is over.” She turned to flee, to run back into the shadows where it was safe.

A hand shot out, gentle but unyielding. Arvel pulled her back, not into a confrontation, but into a hug. A tight, crushing, all-encompassing embrace. He buried his face in her hair and whispered a single, cherished name into the dark.

“Isabella.”

Hina froze. Then melted. She whispered, “You know?”

He held her tighter. “I was just kidding.” His voice was thick. “Isa… was the only one I ever truly loved. And cherished. In every way.”

And then, the legendary Arvel Stormhart began to cry. Not a single, dignified tear, but silent, shaking sobs that wracked his broad frame. “…You’ve been here all this time,” he choked out. “Right under my nose.”

He held her like she was the only real thing in the world. “I’m… I’m sorry,” he wept, the words torn from a place of profound regret. “I wasn’t the father you needed. I wasn’t even there.” He pulled back, his hands on her shoulders, his tear-streaked face bare and vulnerable. “I didn’t know. I swear to every sky, every star, every road I’ve ever walked… I didn’t know you were in this world.”

He looked at her, really saw her for the first time. “I noticed you, but I didn’t see you. I failed you before I even knew your name.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, a gesture of utter surrender and connection. “I can’t change the past. But I promise you this… from now on, I look forward. I learn. I stay.” His voice firmed, not with legendary power, but with a father’s simple, fierce vow. “I don’t know how to be a good father. But I swear I’ll become the best one I can. For you.”

Hina’s tears came then, quiet and healing, soaking into his travel-worn cloak. “I’m here,” he murmured again. “I’m not leaving.”

From behind the cottage wall, Izana watched the silhouette of the hug, saw the shake of Arvel’s shoulders. A smile touched his lips—a warm, relieved smile for her, for the resolution of her pain. His job as silent guardian was done. He slipped away, back toward the festival lights, his own heart feeling strangely lighter.

Arvel pulled back again, staring at Hina’s face through his tears. Then a sound bubbled up in his chest—a laugh. Raw, bright, incredulous joy. It burst out of him, loud and free.

“I have a daughter!” he announced to the night, stunned. Then louder, to the world: “I HAVE A DAUGHTER!”

His smile was blinding, unrestrained, the kind that could disarm armies and light up darkness. “Do you have any idea,” he said, voice shaking with pure happiness, “how absurdly, ridiculously happy I am right now?” He laughed again, wiping his eyes unselfconsciously. “All those wars, all those quests… and this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

He hugged her again, warm and sure. “I’m proud of you,” he whispered. “More than anything. Just knowing you exist… that’s enough.”

In the quiet dark, Hina finally let go of the last shred of fear. She leaned into his hug and whispered, so softly it was almost lost, “Idiot… Da… D-Dad.”

Arvel froze. He pulled back, his golden eyes wide and sharp. “What did you just say?”

Hina took a breath, meeting his gaze. “Dad.”

The word hung between them, sacred and new. Arvel’s expression shifted through a dozen emotions—shock, wonder, overwhelming love. Tears streamed down his face again as a goofy, ridiculous grin spread across it. He hugged her so tightly she squeaked. “From now on,” he declared into her hair, “you always call me Dad.” He repeated the word to himself, tasting it. “Dad… Dad… Hah!” He sounded like a happy fool.

They finally settled, sitting side-by-side on the pond’s edge, the water reflecting their now-calm figures. Arvel looked at her, at her black hair, her fierce eyes, and saw the ghost of the woman he loved.

“You look like her,” he whispered.

“You loved her so much,” Hina stated.

“Yeah.” The memory was a bittersweet ache. “Let me tell you.” He took a deep breath, and the past unfolded not in a telling, but in a showing—vivid flashes of a life lived before:

~ The Flashback ~

The road, years ago. A younger Arvel walked with Laurence and a woman with vibrant pink hair and mischievous sky-blue eyes—Elizabeth.

“Ugh, that monster was so smelly!” Elizabeth complained, waving a hand in front of her nose.

Laurence chuckled. “You fight like a demon and complain like a teenager.”

She pouted. “I am not a teenager! I am a woman!” She winked outrageously.

“You’re something else,” Laurence said, fondness in his tone.

Arvel smirked. “You two make a good couple.”

Both shouted in unison, “SHUT UP, ARVEL!” He just laughed.

Then, a woman’s voice, fierce and scared, cut through the woods. “Stay away from me!”

They moved as one. In a clearing, a beautiful woman with determined eyes was backing away from a group of leering bandits, her foot injured. Arvel’s eyes locked on her. The world seemed to slow. He’d seen beauty before, but this was different. This was Isabella.

Elizabeth and Laurence leaped into the fray, a blur of skill and practiced teamwork. Arvel was frozen, spellbound by the woman’s courage. “OI, IDIOT! MOVE!” Elizabeth yelled.

He shook himself free, a blur of motion disarming two bandits before they could blink. He was at Isabella’s side, catching her as she stumbled. He applied a healing salve to her ankle with a touch surprisingly gentle for such a warrior. Their eyes met. Something quiet and profound passed between them in that chaotic moment.

Later, at an inn, the four of them sat together. The easy camaraderie of Arvel, Laurence, and Elizabeth drew Isabella in. She laughed at their bickering, a sound that made Arvel’s chest feel tight.

“So you’re just going to carry me everywhere now?” Isabella asked days later, blushing as Arvel effortlessly scooped her up to navigate a rocky path.

“Until you’re healed,” he said, as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

Elizabeth grinned from behind them. “Oh, he’s got it bad.”

Weeks passed on the road. Arvel, usually sprinting ahead, now matched his pace to Isabella’s. Elizabeth teased him mercilessly. “You’re strolling! Since when do you stroll?”

Isabella worried. “Am I slowing you down?”

Arvel turned instantly. “Nope. Perfect pace. Ideal pace.”

Elizabeth howled with laughter. Laurence shook his head, smiling. “She’s got you.”

The bond grew in quiet moments by campfires, in shared looks, in Arvel’s protective gestures so instinctual he didn’t even notice them. He looked at Isabella like the road finally had a destination.

Months later, they crested a hill, and Oakhaven lay before them, glowing in the sunset. “Home,” Arvel murmured.

Isabella, seeing it for the first time, was awestruck. “It feels… alive.”

“Good,” Arvel said, walking beside her. “You don’t need to be like us. You just need to know what it feels like to belong.”

More months. The town became their backdrop. Arvel leaning against the fountain, Isabella handing him warm bread. Elizabeth’s relentless teasing, Laurence’s quiet amusement. The slow, undeniable pull between them becoming a tangible force.

Then, one night under the unlit lanterns of a previous Oaklight, the distance finally vanished. After months apart on a quest, Arvel returned. He found Isabella waiting. No words were needed. He kissed her, fierce and gentle, a confession and a promise all at once.

“You’re mine, aren’t you?” he whispered against her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I am yours.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Their wedding was a Sylax affair—chaotic, joyful, full of laughter and heartfelt vows. Isabella Stormhart. The name fit like it had always been hers. They built a life. He, Laurence, and Elizabeth still went on quests, but there was always a home to return to.

Then, the fateful mission. Elizabeth, the mischievous pink-haired sister of their trio, fell. Her last words were for Laurence: “I love you… with my whole heart. Sorry…” She died in his arms. It broke Laurence. It shattered a piece of Arvel.

They returned few months later, hollowed out. ThThey said they'd completed the S-Rank quest, but the cost was etched in their faces. Arvel was a storm of grief and anger. Isabella tried to reach him, to tell him her own news, but his pain was a wall. In a moment of blind frustration, he shouted words he never meant: "Just leave me alone!"

Hurt, carrying her own secret burden, Isabella left. When the fog of grief cleared, Arvel and Laurence searched for her endlessly, desperately. But she had vanished.

~ End Flashback ~

In the present, by the pond, Arvel's voice was rough with old pain. "We never found her."

Hina nodded, her own tears flowing freely now. "Now listen to me," she said, and she showed him her truth:

~ Hina's Flashback ~

A small, remote village. A weary but determined Isabella arrives, already two months pregnant. She wants to tell him, but fear and his last, angry words keep her away. She raises a daughter alone, selling vegetables, telling her stories about her father—the legendary, kind, chaotic Arvel Stormhart.

Little Hina sees her mother cry at night, whispering, "I'm a terrible wife… I'm so sorry, Arvel…"

When Hina is four, Isabella falls ill. The sickness lingers for years. On her deathbed, she holds her young daughter's hand. "My love… my last wish… Please, meet your father. Tell him about yourself. And say sorry from me. Please."

The next day, she is gone. A five-year-old Hina, drowning in grief, makes a vow: She will find her father. She will punch him. She will tell him everything.

Years later, a determined young girl stands before the Sylax guild hall. The receptionist, Lura, smiles kindly. "Sorry, kiddo. Only the Master decides who joins."

Hina waits. She meets Scarlett. The Guild Master takes one look at the fierce, golden-eyed girl and smirks. "Fine. You're in."

At the registration desk, Lura asks for her family name. Hina hesitates, then says, "I don't have one." She writes just 'Hina'. She befriends a younger girl with silver hair—Mio. She starts to love Sylax, this chaotic, welcoming family. But the wish remains.

Then, one day, he returns. Arvel Stormhart, with Laurence beside him. The guild erupts. Hina sees him. All her planned anger evaporates. He is… her dad. She tries to speak, but fear wins. Time and again, she loses her nerve. Laurence becomes a beloved teacher. She watches her father from afar, loving him silently.

Then Laurence dies. The loss is another blow. Before she can gather her courage again, Arvel takes the 100-year quest and leaves. Hope seems lost.

She grows up in Sylax. It becomes her true home. She buries the dream.

Then, a decade later, he walks back through the door, a legend completed. And the dream, long dormant, flares to life once more.

~ End Flashback ~

By the pond, Hina finished her story. “I wanted to punch you. I saw Mama dying.”

Arvel reached out, took her hand, and placed it against his own chest, over his heart. “Do it,” he said, his voice thick. “I deserve it.”

She didn’t punch him. She held on.

A deep, resonant horn blast echoed through the night, cutting through the distant festival noise. The signal. The lantern ceremony was beginning.

Arvel stood, pulling Hina up with him. He gave her a bittersweet, tear-streaked smile. “Come on. Let’s write her name on a lantern. And let’s fly it.” He looked at her, truly seeing all of her for the first time. “My dear… Hina Stormhart.”

Her full name, spoken by her father, washed over her like a blessing. It was the first time anyone had ever called her by it. It was her true name. She was Hina Stormhart, daughter of a legend, and a member of the Untamed Guild.

Hand in hand, they turned their backs on the dark pond and walked toward the light, the noise, and the glowing lanterns of Oaklight, ready to remember the past and finally face the future—together.

Chapter 61: Lanterns of Remembrance

The deep, resonant call of the festival horn rolled through Oakhaven like a gentle thunderclap, pulling the entire town toward the ancient oak grove at its heart. The chaotic pre-festival energy coalesced into a river of people, all flowing in one direction.

Shojin led their little trio like a hyperactive herding dog, his arms laden with an absurd assortment of festival spoils: two half-eaten meat skewers, a bag of candied nuts, a glowing toy sword tucked under his arm, and a large, sticky pastry he was attempting to eat without dropping everything else.

“C’mon, you two! The horn means it’s starting! We can’t miss the floaty-light thing!” he called back, his voice muffled by pastry.

Behind him, Kokan and Kurohana walked at a more reasonable pace. Kokan’s hands were tucked into his pockets, his stormy eyes taking in the solemn shift in the crowd’s mood. Kurohana walked beside him, her crimson eyes wide, absorbing the way the festive lights began to blend with a deeper, more respectful atmosphere.

“It’s… changing,” she murmured.

Kokan nodded. “From celebration to ceremony. The transition is seamless.”

Shojin, not listening, was trying to juggle his skewer and pastry while walking backward. “I bet the lanterns are even cooler up close! Do you think they let you launch one with a fireball? For, like, extra altitude? OW!”

THUD.

He walked backward straight into a solid, immovable object. The impact sent his skewers flying, his pastry splattering on the cobblestones, and the toy sword clattering away. He stumbled back, rubbing his forehead.

“Oi—!” he began, his complaint cutting off as he looked up.

A man stood before him, having seemingly appeared out of thin air. He was tall, with long, straight black hair that fell to his shoulders and striking violet eyes that held a lazy, amused glint. He wore dark, practical travel clothes, and around his neck, a crimson Sylax pendant glinted. He looked to be in his early twenties, with a sharp, handsome face and an aura of relaxed power.

Shojin’s eyes went from the man’s face to his pendant, then back to his face. His jaw dropped. He took a stumbling step back, his finger coming up to point shakily. “L-L… LAURENCE?!”

Kokan and Kurohana rushed forward, stopping beside their stunned friend. “Are you alright?” Kokan asked, but his gaze followed Shojin’s pointing finger. The stranger did bear a passing resemblance to the descriptions of Laurence Davis—the same dark hair, the same build. But Laurence was dead.

“A ghost…” Shojin whispered, his face pale. “The ghost of Laurence!”

The stranger chuckled, a low, warm sound. “Not quite.”

Shojin’s fight-or-flight instinct chose flight. He spun on his heel to run, but the man moved faster than sight. One moment he was several feet away, the next his hand was on the back of Shojin’s collar, holding him gently but firmly in place.

“I am not a ghost,” the man said, amused.

Shojin, still facing away, trembled. “Then… you’re a lost spirit? A haunt? An entity? An eidolon?!”

The man laughed heartily. “No.”

Shojin twisted his head, eyes wide with dawning horror. “A REVENANT?!” he yelled. “I put flowers on your grave! I did nothing wrong! Don’t haunt me!”

This sent the stranger into another fit of laughter. He released Shojin’s collar and gave him a light, friendly thump on the back of the head. “I am not a ghost, a haunt, a revenant, an entity, a lost spirit, or an eidolon. And I’m not Laurence.”

Shojin finally stopped trying to bolt. He turned slowly, suspicion etched on his face. “Then who are you? And why do you look like him and have his last name?” He’d glimpsed the name ‘Davis’ on the man’s gear.

The stranger’s violet eyes sparkled. “I’m Lucas Davis. Laurence’s… much younger, far more handsome, and still very much alive little brother.”

Shojin’s brain processed this with visible effort. His pointed finger dropped. “Little brother? But… he never mentioned a brother.”

“Twelve years younger,” Lucas said with a shrug. “He probably thought I was still in diapers. Now, who are you, new wild soul who knows my brother?”

Shojin drew himself up, his fear replaced by instant, dramatic pride. “I AM SHOJIN TAKERU! FUTURE GREATEST ADVENTURER OF SYLAX!”

Lucas’s eyebrows rose, and he laughed again, a sound full of genuine delight. “Future greatest adventurer! I like the confidence!” His gaze then shifted to the two behind Shojin. His eyes, sharp and assessing, took in Kokan’s noble bearing and Kurohana’s unique beauty. “And your friends?”

Kokan gave a slight, polite nod. “Kokan Tohei.”

Lucas’s eyes widened a fraction. Tohei. The name of the founders. He gave a more respectful nod. “An honor. Just Kokan is fine.”

He then turned his full attention to Kurohana. A charming, roguish smile touched his lips. He stepped forward, took her hand with a flourish, and bowed, brushing his lips against her knuckles. “And you, beautiful lady?”

Kurohana blinked, nonplussed, and extracted her hand. “Kurohana Enji.”

“At your service, Miss Enji,” Lucas said, straightening up just as another, more urgent horn blast echoed.

“We should keep moving,” Kokan said, his voice cutting through the moment. “The ceremony is beginning.”

The four of them fell into step, joining the main flow of the crowd toward the town square. As they walked, Kokan asked, “You’re a Sylax member, but I’ve never seen you. You were on a quest?”

Lucas nodded, his easy smile returning. “Yeah. Me and an idiot partner were on an S-rank, fifty-year job. Nasty business involving a cursed glacier and some very angry ice spirits.”

“You completed it?” Kurohana asked.

“Nah,” Lucas said, waving a hand dismissively. “But you don’t miss Oaklight. Not for anything. I have to fly my big brother’s name on a lantern. And his lover’s, Elizabeth. If I didn’t, they’d probably haunt me for real. I don’t take risks with those two.”

They emerged into the vast town square, which was now packed. Hundreds of people—adventurers, townsfolk, tourists—stood in a hushed, expectant crowd around the perimeter. In the center, the ancient oaks formed a natural cathedral, their branches hung with thousands of unlit paper lanterns. A deep, reverent silence was settling over the throng.

Lucas’s sharp eyes scanned the crowd, landing on a familiar head of crimson-black hair. His easy smile vanished, replaced by a look of confused shock, then dawning, white-hot rage. He saw Arvel Stormhart standing near the front, his arm wrapped protectively around the shoulders of a young woman with black hair—Hina. They were standing close, her head leaning against his arm in a familiar, intimate way.

“You IDIOT, ARVEL!” Lucas’s voice was a whip-crack of anger, cutting through the respectful quiet. He didn’t walk. One second he was with Shojin’s group, the next he had teleported in a ripple of displaced air, appearing directly in front of Arvel and Hina.

The crowd gasped at the sudden movement and the outburst.

Arvel looked up, startled. “Hey, Lucas! When did you—?”

“You CHEATER!” Lucas roared, pointing an accusing finger at Arvel’s face.

Arvel blinked. “Cheater?”

Lucas’s furious gaze shot to Hina, who flinched back. “WHO IS SHE?!”

Arvel’s expression softened into a look of pride. “Oh! This is Hina. Hina Stormhart.”

The name ‘Stormhart’ echoed through the front of the crowd. Whispers exploded. Hina? Stormhart? What?

Lucas’s face contorted with betrayal. “Stormhart? You gave her your NAME?” Without waiting for an answer, he swung a furious punch at Arvel’s head.

Arvel leaned back, the fist whistling past his ear. “Lucas, what in the seven hells—?”

“YOU IDIOT! YOU DUFFER!” Lucas yelled, launching a rapid series of attacks—jabs, kicks, each one aimed with lethal precision but met only by Arvel’s effortless, lazy dodges. The crowd scrambled back, forming a ring around them.

“How could you do this to Sis Isa?!” Lucas snarled, a kick barely missing Arvel’s ribs.

Arvel danced back, utterly confused. “Do what? What did I do?”

Lucas paused, chest heaving, his violet eyes blazing. “Seeing her… she’s, what, eighteen? Nineteen? Twenty?” He gestured wildly at Hina.

Arvel nodded, still dodging a follow-up strike. “Yeah, I know.”

“AND YOU LOVE HER? KNOWING HER AGE?” Lucas’s voice was a mix of fury and heartbreak.

“Yeah!” Arvel said, easily sidestepping another blow. “I know she’s young, but I love her! I love her more than anything in this world!”

The admission made the crowd gasp louder. Hina’s face flushed crimson.

Lucas’s rage seemed to triple. He charged, energy crackling around his fists. “AND YOU MADE HER A STORMHART?!”

“She was always a Stormhart!” Arvel replied, parrying a blow with his forearm.

“YOU DIDN’T CARE ABOUT SIS ISA! YOU MARRIED SOME YOUNG GIRL AND GAVE HER THE NAME! YOU’RE A TRAITOR TO HER MEMORY!” Lucas gathered energy for a devastating punch, the air shimmering around his fist. “I’LL—”

“SHE’S MY DAUGHTER, YOU ABSOLUTE MORON!”

Arvel’s shout, laced with equal parts exasperation and laughter, froze Lucas mid-swing. The crackling energy around his fist fizzled out.

Lucas stared. “Daughter?”

“Yeah!” Arvel said, throwing his hands up. “My daughter! Mine and Isabella’s! This is Hina Stormhart, our daughter!”

The square fell into a dead silence. Every eye was locked on them.

Lucas’s furious posture deflated. His arm dropped to his side. He looked from Arvel’s annoyed face to Hina’s embarrassed one, the pieces clicking together with almost audible thuds. The same golden eyes. The resemblance he’d been too blind with anger to see.

“Oh,” Lucas said, his voice small. “Oh, crap.”

Arvel stepped forward and smacked the back of Lucas’s head with an open palm. THWACK! “You idiot! What were you thinking? That I’d cheat on my Isa with my own daughter? What is wrong with you?”

Lucas clutched his head, a goofy, embarrassed grin spreading across his face. “I, uh… jumped to conclusions?” He turned to Hina, who was hiding her face in her hands. He shuffled forward, his bravado gone. “Hey, kid. I am… so, so sorry. I’m an idiot. A huge, impulsive, teleporting idiot.”

Hina peeked through her fingers and nodded, her own lips twitching despite the massive public spectacle.

The crowd’s whispers were now a roar of astonishment. Hina is Stormhart’s daughter? Since when? How?

Lucas turned back to Arvel, his expression shifting to one of hurt. “You knew all this time and didn’t tell me? You idiot!”

Arvel’s face softened. “I just found out tonight, Lucas.”

Lucas and most of the nearby Sylax members shouted in unison: “WHAT?!”

Lucas’s eyes widened. “So she was… pregnant when she left?”

Arvel’s smile turned bittersweet. He nodded. “Yeah. I visited her… it was the last time I saw her. She must have been about two months along then.” His voice was thick with regret.

Lucas absorbed this, then turned to Hina with a completely new expression—one of wonder and sudden, fierce affection. He stepped closer, his voice gentle. “Hey, Hina. You can… you

can call me Uncle."

Arvel and Hina spoke at the same time: "What?!"

Lucas scratched his head. "Well, Sis Isa always treated me like her little brother. We weren't related by blood, but she was my big sis. So technically, I'm your uncle."

Arvel burst out laughing. "She thought of you more as our son, you know."

Lucas waved a dismissive hand, a dramatic sigh escaping him. "Fine, fine. I know." He turned his puppy-dog eyes on Hina. "You can call me big brother, then. Please? Lil' sis Hina? Call me big brother. Big brother. Big brother…"

Hina, overwhelmed by the sheer chaotic force of his personality, sighed in defeat. "Big brother… Lucas."

Lucas beamed, looking utterly victorious. "Yes!" He then turned back to Arvel. "So, whose name are you writing?"

Arvel's expression sobered. "Isabella Stormhart."

Lucas's smile faded. He hadn't known Isabella was dead. The news hit him like a physical blow. He gave a slow, understanding nod, a bitter smile touching his lips. "Okay."

Before more could be said, a familiar, grumpy voice cut through the murmurs. "Oi. If your family reunion drama is over, we have a ceremony to start. Some of us would like to get to the remembering-before-midnight part."

Scarlett stood at the edge of the oak grove, arms crossed, a knowing smirk on her face. She'd clearly been watching the whole debacle.

Lucas turned to her, his grin returning. "Master! It's been a year, and you haven't changed a bit!"

Scarlett's crimson eyes scanned behind him. "Oi, blacky. Where's whitey?"

Lucas blinked. "Oh, you mean Soren? He's, uh…" He was cut off as an elder townsman, the head of the Oakhaven council, stepped onto a small dais near the great oak.

"People of Oakhaven! Friends of Sylax! Visitors from afar!" the elder's voice boomed with practiced warmth. "Tonight is the Night of Oaklight! The night of remembrance!" He gestured to Scarlett. "I ask Guild Master Scarlett of Sylax to say a few words."

Scarlett sauntered forward, her lazy grace commanding absolute silence. She stopped beside the elder, her crimson eyes sweeping the massive crowd. She didn't smile.

“Alright, listen up, everyone,” she began, her voice carrying without effort. “This isn’t a cute festival activity. This isn’t a performance. And it’s definitely not a reason to skip training or quests the rest of the year.” A few nervous chuckles rippled through the crowd.

Her gaze hardened. “Tonight… tonight is about respect. About memory. About chaos turned into something meaningful. These lanterns aren’t just pretty lights drifting in the sky—they are names, lives, and stories.”

She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. “Every Sylax adventurer who gave everything—sometimes too much—every citizen of Oakhaven who passed and left this town, they all deserve more than forgotten whispers. So we light these lanterns. We honor them. And yes, we do it with style, because if Sylax teaches us anything, it’s that even death doesn’t deserve boring rituals.”

Her eyes sharpened, scanning the crowd. “So when you place your lantern in the sky, remember: it’s not just paper and flame. It’s laughter, chaos, scars, courage, mistakes, and love. It’s the reason why every adventurer here—dead or alive—mattered. And if you dare just toss your lantern up without thought, I will personally make sure you’re assigned to the town’s most boring quest tomorrow… for a month.”

A wave of laughter, relieved and genuine, swept through the square. Scarlett allowed a faint smirk. “Tonight, the Great Oak watches. The spirits watch. And we watch, together. So bow your heads, light your lanterns, and let the sky remember those who shaped this town and this guild. The late Sylax adventurers. The citizens we lost. And the bonds that keep all of us untamed, reckless, and alive.” She raised a hand. “Now… release them.”

The ceremony began. Townsfolk and adventurers alike stepped forward to the long tables laden with blank paper lanterns, brushes, and pots of glowing, enchanted ink.

Shojin tried to play it cool. Hands in pockets, lazy smile, pretending he was just watching floating paper. But the second the first lanterns were lit and the ancient oak spirits began to awaken—their bark glowing from within with soft emerald light—his mouth shut. No jokes. No sarcasm. He tilted his head back, eyes reflecting hundreds of lanterns, and quietly muttered, “My old party back home never did anything this stupidly beautiful…” Then he caught Mio looking at him from a few feet away and instantly switched modes, leaning over to whisper loudly to Kokan, “This is totally messing with my image, man.” He didn’t look away from the sky, though.

Kokan went rigid. The serious, analytical vibe cracked clean in half as he watched the names being written—not titles, not ranks, just names of people who were loved. He suddenly understood what Scarlett meant about Sylax. Not glory. Not fame. Just… people who mattered. His fists clenched at his sides as if making a silent vow. No speeches. No drama. Just a new, fierce resolve in his stormy eyes.

Kurohana was the one who almost broke. The glowing trees, the hum of spirit energy, it resonated with something deep and primal in her demonic blood. It wasn’t dark or

threatening; it was ancient and respectful. She stared at the lanterns, then down at her own hands as if afraid they'd disappear. Tears slid down her cheeks without her noticing until Shojin, with uncharacteristic gentleness, awkwardly shoved a (slightly sticky) handkerchief at her. "Don't get snot on the sacred forest," he whispered. "The spirits might sue us."

They stood together under a sky filling with names, realizing this guild, this town, this chaos… it wasn't just a place. It was a promise.

The Winslow team thought they knew what ceremony meant. They were wrong.

Prince Izana stepped forward with a lantern held carefully in both hands. For once, the bold, sarcastic royal had nothing smart to say. The name he wrote was Cornelia. Not 'Queen Cornelia of Winslow'. Just Cornelia. A woman who had laughed in this town. When the oak spirits brightened as his lantern rose, his jaw tightened. He released it, watched it join the golden river, and gave a small, respectful bow. Not like a prince. Like a son who finally understood what it meant to belong somewhere.

Riku, normally chaos in boots, was silent. He scratched the back of his neck, eyes fixed on the shimmering canopy, then muttered, "We gotta steal this idea for Winslow. Immediately." He then pretended to have dust in his eyes.

Reina stood tall, hands folded behind her back, the serious swordswoman letting emotion show on her face. She watched the trees light up with the same focused intensity she had before battle, except this time there was no enemy. Just memory. Respect.

Renard tried to maintain his strict demeanor, but when the lanterns drifted into the glowing branches, he exhaled slowly, as if a burden had loosened. He glanced at his prince's bowed head and stepped closer without a word.

Four outsiders. One sky full of names. And Winslow's finest realized this wasn't just a festival. It was a home they never knew they were missing.

Arvel and Hina didn't walk up with the crowd. They simply appeared at a lantern table as if the universe had scheduled them there. Hina held the lantern as if it were made of glass. The name written was Isabella Stormhart.

Her hands shook. Arvel noticed. He took the lantern from her, steadied it, then placed one hand over hers. No speeches. No drama. He lit the wick with a touch.

For once, Arvel Stormhart wasn't joking or lazy-smiling. He just watched the flame catch, his golden eyes softer than anyone in Sylax had ever seen. They released it together.

The lantern rose, drifting into the glowing branches where the oak spirits brightened in recognition. The gold light brushed their faces, and Hina leaned into Arvel without thinking. He held her hand tighter—not as a legend, but as a father.

Above them, Isabella's lantern glowed a particularly warm, steady gold, slipping into the river of memories.

Lucas waited until most lanterns were already airborne. Typical. He stood with two lanterns, scowling at the sky as if it offended him. The names were written in thick, angry handwriting: Laurence Davis. Elizabeth Taylor.

He lit the first, muttering, "You were always charging in without thinking." Then the second. His jaw tightened. "And you followed him like it wasn't the dumbest love story ever."

He held them both, delaying the inevitable through sheer stubbornness. Then he let them go. "You two were idiots," he said flatly, watching them rise together. The oak spirits responded, leaves glowing brighter around the twin lights. Lucas turned away before anyone could see the moisture in his violet eyes.

Mio Amatsuki stood in line longer than necessary, two lanterns held to her chest. The names were written in careful, rounded letters: Leon Amatsuki. Rose Amatsuki.

Her hands wouldn't stop shaking. She lit the wicks, her breath hitching. "They were Sylax," she whispered. "They were my home… before this became my home." She released them together.

The oak spirits glowed brilliantly, emerald light rippling through the branches as if the forest itself were bowing. The lanterns drifted upward, side by side, into the sea of gold.

All around, the seasoned Sylax adventurers—the loud, the chaotic, the untamable—stood quietly. Some grinned, remembering fallen friends who laughed too loud. Some whispered private jokes to the sky. Some simply stared, feeling the weight of history in every flicker. When the oak spirits hummed, they didn't need to look at each other. They felt it. The bond. The chaos that built them. The family they honored.

Newbies huddled together, wide-eyed. "Is… is this really a festival?" one whispered. They watched the trees glow from within, felt the hum in their chests. "It's like the whole town is alive," a girl murmured, tears in her eyes. They understood, in that moment, a tiny fraction of what Sylax meant. Chaos could be beautiful. Bonds could light the sky.

Townsfolk—elders, adults, children—bowed instinctively as the spirits awakened. They whispered thanks, remembered names, felt the unity of town and guild in the trembling air. It was pride, chaos, memory, and untamed love made visible.

Tourists gaped, their chatter dying. Scholars scribbled frantically. Children pointed, squealing. “I’ve never seen anything like this,” a woman breathed. Even the most skeptical felt it: the untamed joy, the respect, the bond that made Oaklight unique in all the world.

The sky above Oakhaven became a moving constellation of golden light, guided by the emerald glow of the ancient oaks. The air hummed with spirit magic and memory. For one night, chaos, grief, joy, and love blended into one impossible, beautiful thing.

Oaklight.

Chapter 62: When the Night Forgot Its Sorrows

Far from the golden glow of Oakhaven, in the heart of a cursed glacier where the air tasted of iron and eternal winter, a man sat on a throne he had carved from living ice. Soren's coat, a blend of deep blue and pristine white, stood out against the monochrome wasteland. His hair was the color of fresh snow, and his eyes, a piercing blue, were currently hidden behind silver-tinted glasses as he scowled at nothing.

"Idiot. Duffer. You did it again," he muttered to the frozen wind.

With a sigh that crystallized in the air, he raised a hand. The space before him shimmered, and two small, shimmering figures materialized, yawning dramatically. They were twin spirits, Yu and Xu, embodiments of dream and whimsy, looking profoundly annoyed at being summoned.

"We were sleeping, Soren," Yu mumbled, rubbing her eyes with tiny fists.
"Seriously!"Xu added, floating in a lazy circle. "I was dreaming about a new constellation made of sugar-dust! You are really stupid, interrupting that!"

Soren ignored their complaints, his foot tapping an aggressive rhythm on the ice. "Don't tell me. Lucas did something again." Xu asked.

Yu and Xu exchanged a look of pure, exhausted sibling understanding. Xu sighed. "Don't say the idiot teleported himself into another dimension of trouble."

"I wonder how you two are 'best friends,'" Yu said, making air quotes.

Soren's scowl deepened. "We are not best friends. We are rivals. Eternal, bitter, rivals. And how would you think I'd become best friends with that reckless, thoughtless, teleporting—!"

"Yeah, yeah," the twins chorused in a whisper. "You're always ready to die for each other while shouting 'I HATE YOU!' We know the drill. Uff."

"Xu," Soren said, his voice a low growl. "What did he doing this time?"

"What did who do?" Xu asked innocently.

"THE IDIOT LUCAS!" Soren exploded, standing up. The ice beneath his feet cracked. "What does he think he is? That stupid, teleporting brat! That duffer! He said he was coming here, to the Glacier of Sighs, to hunt the Frost Wraith! HE'S NOT HERE!" He kicked a shard of ice, sending it skittering. "Which means he tricked me! Again! He didn't come back to the quest! Which means…" Soren's flawless, icy composure shattered into pure, childish frustration.

“He’s in Oakhaven! He’s probably stuffing his face, laughing, and enjoying Oaklight without me! THAT IDIOT!”

Yu and Xu gave each other a final, resigned nod. They bowed in mid-air. “At your service, Master Soren. What do you wish of us?”

“Teleport me to Oakhaven. Now.”

The twins blinked. “Master,” Xu said carefully. “We are not like Lucas, born with a spatial affinity. We are dream-weavers. A long-range teleport for a being of your… density… will consume nearly all our mana. We will fade for a month. A whole month of no dreams, no sweets, no fun.”

“A dreadful prospect,” Yu added, shuddering.

“I will teach him his lesson,” Soren said, his blue eyes gleaming with vengeful intent behind his glasses. “Now. It is my order. Teleport me to Oakhaven.”

The twins sighed in unison, cursed Lucas’s name and the concept of rivalry, and joined hands. Their small forms blazed with silvery light. The air around Soren warped, space folding in on itself with a sound like tearing silk. “Try not to land on him,” Xu grumbled. “It’s undignified.”

They vanished. The teleport was jarring, messy, and utterly inelegant.

In Oakhaven, Lucas was in the middle of boasting to a group of wide-eyed junior adventurers about the time he’d “teleported a wyvern’s lunch back into its stomach.” He never saw it coming.

There was a sound like a popped balloon and a ripple of distorted air above him. Then, a figure in blue and white dropped from a height of about four feet, landing directly on Lucas’s back with a knee perfectly positioned on his spine and a boot planted firmly on the back of his head, driving his face into the soft, muddy ground near a food stall.

SPLUT.

The twins, their forms already flickering and transparent, gave a weak, synchronized wave before popping out of existence with a sound like a sigh.

Lucas knew that knee. That boot. That specific, infuriating weight. With his mouth full of cold, gritty mud, he mumbled, “Mmphf! Yoo idyot! Wha’ a’ you doin’ ‘ere?!”

Soren, now sitting calmly on his rival’s back as if it were a particularly lumpy chair, adjusted his sunglasses. “What did you think, you idiot? That you could trick me this year, too?”

“G’off m’top!” Lucas’s voice was a mud-muffled shriek, his hands flailing.

“You duffer. Idiot.”

Around them, the festival paused. A crowd gathered. Several tourist women, seeing Soren’s handsome, snow-haired profile and cool demeanor, let out appreciative sighs. “So dashing!” one whispered. “And so decisive!”

Lucas, meanwhile, was trying to spit out mud. “Yoo idyot! B’ I’m n’ a couch!”

Scarlett’s voice, dry as old bones, cut through the murmurs. “Hey, whitey. It’s been a long time.”

Soren’s gaze shifted. He gave a curt nod, his posture not changing. “Master. It has been many years.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“MASTER!” Lucas shouted, finding a slightly clearer patch of ground for his mouth. “Say ‘is idyot I’m n’a couch! Say ‘im t’ stay ‘side from m’top!”

Scarlett peered down. “Oh, blacky. What are you doing down there? Collecting mushrooms?”

Arvel wandered over, a grin splitting his face. “Hey, Soren. Forgive your best friend and let him up, eh?”

The effect was instant. Both Soren and Lucas shouted in perfect, furious unison, “WE ARE NOT BEST FRIENDS! WE ARE RIVALS!”

Soren finally deigned to stand up, brushing imaginary dust from his immaculate coat. Lucas sprang to his feet, sputtering and wiping mud from his face and hair, looking like an angry, bedraggled cat.

It was then Soren noticed Hina standing slightly behind Arvel, watching the spectacle with wide, golden eyes. “Who is she?”

Lucas, seeing an opportunity for both revenge and one-upmanship, slid over to Hina with a smug grin, throwing an arm around her shoulders. “This,” he announced grandly, “is Hina. Arvel Stormhart’s daughter.” He paused for effect, then delivered his coup de grâce, aiming it directly at Soren’s heart. “And she calls me big brother.” He stuck his tongue out. “She’s my lil’ sis.”

A flicker of something—not jealousy, but a deep, profound sense of competitive injustice—passed over Soren’s face. He strode over, ignoring Lucas, and looked down at Hina. “Call me brother, too,” he stated, as if issuing a royal decree. “I will be a far superior big brother than this… teleporting wiffy-shiffy idiot.”

Lucas gasped in mock outrage. “Wiffy-shiffy?! I am a master of spatial manipulation! And I’m the better big brother!”

“You are an idiot duffer who uses his powers to skip line queues.”
“And you’re a frosty priss who summons spirits to chill his drinks!”
“At least my methods are elegant!”
“At least mine areuseful!”

They descended into bickering, standing on either side of a deeply confused but amused Hina. Arvel watched, laughing so hard he had to lean against a stall.

Nearby, a pair of scholarly tourists from a distant city of libraries observed the scene with academic fervor. The first, peering through enchanted spectacles, gasped. “Ying and Yang!”

“What?” his companion asked, adjusting his own glasses.

“The Duo! The Black and White! The Teleporter and the Summoner! Rare ability users of legend! They’re supposed to be on a decades-long S-rank quest in the Northern Wastes! They’re here?” His finger trembled as he pointed at the squabbling pair. Then it swung to Arvel. “And that… is Arvel Stormhart. The man who finished a century quest in a decade.” It swung to Scarlett, who was now stealing a roasted potato from a distracted vendor. “And her… the founders of Sylphania know her by name!” It landed on Kokan, who was observing the scene with detached calm. “A Tohei! Direct descendant of the Covenant Bond!”

The second scholar was frantically sketching in a notebook. “Incredible! And look! The Crimson Fangs!” He pointed to Isamu, who was trying to feed Akira a piece of cake while she scowled, to Yudai arm-wrestling three people at once, to Hayate laughing with a child on each shoulder, and to Pino trying to convince a dog to wear a tiny hat. “And the Celestia Pact! And is that… Master Chef James? The ‘Divine Chef’ who retired from adventuring after he cooked a dragon steak so good the dragon’s spirit apologized?!”

They looked at each other, their faces pale with awe. “What… is this guild?” one whispered. “This ‘lowest-ranked’ guild… it’s a haven for living legends!”

Their world of tidy rankings and documented power levels had just been cheerfully, chaotically shattered.

Izana watched Hina’s predicament with a warm smile. Seeing her flustered but happy, surrounded by these chaotic, powerful people who now claimed her as family, eased something in his chest. His mission felt galaxies away.

He didn’t notice Renard and Reina being gently but firmly ushered by a group of giggling aunties toward a “Couple’s Fortune Stall.” Before they could protest, they were handed a single, beautifully crafted rose cake with two forks.

“For your future!” a rosy-cheeked woman beamed. “Eat it together! Your bond will grow with every shared bite! It’s a fortune cake!”

Renard, ever literal, took his fork. “A cake for our future success as knights? An interesting tradition.” He took a hearty bite, nodding in approval. “Nutritious.”

Reina stared at him, then at the cake, then at the expectant aunties. With a sigh that spoke of lifetimes of suffering, she picked up the other fork. How am I stuck with the densest man not in the seven kingdoms, but in the entire known world? She took a small, precise bite, her face a masterpiece of long-suffering endurance.

Nearby, Riku nudged Izana, pointing at them and shaking with silent laughter. Izana tried to chastise him but was already grinning. “Don’t laugh,” he said, laughing.

Not far away, Isamu had finally succeeded in getting Akira to share a similar cake. She ate with a look of grim determination, as if consuming the cake was a tactical obstacle to be overcome.

Kokan, Shojin, and Kurohana moved through the festival as a unit. For Kurohana, Shojin was the chaotic, sun-bright little brother she never knew she needed—exasperating, but whose energy was infectious. For Shojin, Kokan and Kurohana were his bedrock, the calm and the fierce who somehow understood his chaos. Their bond was easy, built on shared battles and silent understandings.

They spotted a familiar crimson coat attempting to slip away from the main square. With the synchronicity of a practiced team, they intercepted her.

“Master! You’re leaving?” Shojin asked, blocking her path.
“The festival continues,”Kokan stated, appearing on her other side.
“You should…enjoy it with us,” Kurohana added, finishing the triangle.

Scarlett looked at their three faces—Shojin’s eager grin, Kokan’s steady gaze, Kurohana’s hopeful eyes. She saw not just apprentices, but her headaches, her responsibilities, her… kids. She let out a sigh of profound suffering. “You three are the worst. Fine. But if anyone expects me to be cheerful, I’m leaving.”

They dragged her into the festivities, and though she complained about the noise, the smells, and the “pointless sentimentality,” she didn’t leave. She watched Shojin attempt a festival game and fail spectacularly, offered Kurohana a rare, blunt compliment on her throwing-knife technique, and gave Kokan a nod of approval when he solved a merchant’s puzzle lock in seconds. It was family, in the untamed, messy, perfect Sylax way.

Their little group found Mio sitting alone on a quiet bench under a glowing oak, a half-eaten rose cake on her lap. She looked up, a soft smile touching her lips. “Hi, Kuro. Hi, Kokan. Hey, Master. H-hi, Shojin-sama.”

Shojin's eyes zeroed in on the cake. "Hey, Mio! Where'd you get that? It looks amazing!" He bounded over.

"Umm, it was the last piece…" Mio said, her voice growing faint as he loomed closer.

Shojin peered at it. "Oh, wow, that's a big slice for one person. No way you can finish all that!" Before she could utter a word of protest—before she could explain the tradition, the shared fortune, the romance of the shared bite—he leaned down and took a large bite directly from her cake, using her fork.

In Mio's mind, the world exploded. The fortune cake. Sharing it. The same fork. Indirect kiss. Future. Bond. Couple. Shojin-sama. Our future. Together. AHHHHHH—

Her systems overloaded. Her face turned the color of a ripe tomato. Her eyes rolled back. With a soft, blissful sigh of "Shojin-sama…", she slumped sideways, unconscious.

Kokan and Kurohana lunged forward, catching her before she hit the ground. Scarlett's hand shot out, snagging the back of Shojin's shirt as he stared, bewildered, cake crumbs on his chin.

WHAP! Scarlett smacked the back of his head. "You idiot."

"What?! What did I do?!"

Scarlett didn't answer. She simply scooped up the unconscious Mio with surprising gentleness. "Now I have to deliver her to her room. Because of you, you absolute moron." She strode off, leaving a trail of confused adventurers.

Shojin turned to Kurohana, rubbing his head. "What? What was that for, Kuro?"

Kurohana's eye twitched. She grabbed the nearest soft toy from a stall—a large, fluffy griffin—and whacked him over the head with it. "Seriously! You idiot, Shojin!"

"WHAT DID I DO?!"
"What did you do?!You're asking me?! Mio is a girl!"
"I KNOW!"
"And you are aboy!"
"I KNOW!BUT WHAT'S THAT GOT TO DO WITH MIO COLLAPSED?!"

Kurohana made a sound of pure frustration, threw the griffin at him, and stormed off like an angry, beautiful storm cloud. Shojin turned to his last hope. "Kokan? What's happening?"

Kokan watched Kurohana's retreating back, then looked at his utterly clueless friend. He placed a hand on Shojin's shoulder. "Mio is a girl. Kurohana is also a girl. If you do something like that to any other girl in the future… you will also get hit." He gave a final, pitying pat and walked after Kurohana, leaving Shojin alone in the crowd, holding a fluffy griffin and a profound, world-shaking confusion about the mysterious rules of cake and girls.

High in the spires of the Sylphanian capital, in a chamber that smelled of old parchment and older magic, two figures sat.

“So,” Karatos rumbled, his Oni horns catching the moonlight. “What is our wild Scara planning now?”

Lina, her light-elf features serene, sipped from a crystal goblet. “It does not matter what she plans. She is doing what she has always done: gathering the unusual, protecting the lost, and building a family strong enough to weather any storm. We must focus on the fading barrier. And… of course, Scara is at the heart of it. She is not a wild kid anymore, Karatos. She is Guild Master Scarlett Yami of Sylax.”

Karatos threw his head back and laughed, a sound that echoed with millennia of fondness and pride. “Some things never change. And some things change exactly as they should.”

In a realm of shifting shadows and molten rock, upon a throne of blackened bone, a figure stirred. A demon servitor knelt, trembling.

“So… Kagemaru was broken. And little Enji hides within their walls.” The voice was a symphony of malice and curiosity. “And someone else… possesses Divine energy. How… interesting.”

A slow, psychic laugh filled the chamber, a sound that promised madness and ruin. The game was far from over. In fact, it had just become deliciously complicated.

Back in Oakhaven, in a quiet room overlooking the festival, Scarlett placed a blanket over the sleeping Mio. The girl murmured in her sleep, a smile on her lips. Scarlett stood by the window, watching her guild—her family—laugh, argue, eat, and remember beneath a sky still dusted with the fading light of lanterns.

A sudden, unexplainable chill ran down her spine. She sneezed once, sharply. Someone’s remembering me.

Her crimson eyes lifted from the warm lights below to the cold, star-dusted sky above. The final echoes of Oaklight joy seemed to fade, replaced by the silent, immense weight of what was to come.

“I wonder who our enemy is,” she whispered to the night, her voice barely a breath. “An enemy with Divine energy…” Her gaze was sharp, untamed, and utterly unafraid. “We will have to be ready. I wonder what the future holds.”

She stood there long after the last lantern’s glow vanished, a solitary, crimson-clad sentinel between the warmth of her chaotic home and the vast, silent dark, ready for whatever storm it would bring.

As the final lantern light fades from the Oakhaven sky and the echoes of laughter settle into a contented quiet, a deeper silence whispers of unresolved shadows. The Untamed Guild has celebrated its bonds and remembered its lost, but the future looms, vast and uncertain.

Who or What possesses Divine Energy and is aiding the demons? Is it a rogue god, a fallen celestial, or something else entirely that has turned against its own nature?

Why would a being of Divine power side with demons? What grievance, ambition, or corruption could lead to such an unholy alliance?

What is the full story of Shojin's own lineage? His father, Anderson Takeru, seemed more than a simple villager. Could his chaotic strength have a deeper source?

As the direct descendant of the founders, what unique role is Kokan destined to play? Is his presence in Sylax mere chance, or is he being subtly groomed for a purpose tied to the Covenant Bond and the coming war?

What will be the consequence of Kurohana's true heritage being known to the wider world? Will fear or acceptance win? How will she balance her demonic power with her love for her new family?

What is the full extent and true origin of Scarlett's power?

When will Prince Izana's cover be blown, and what will be the fallout? His mission is crumbling as he bonds with Sylax. Will he choose his kingdom or his newfound family? And what of the growing, unspoken thing between him and Hina?

Who is the Demon King who finds the situation "interesting"? What is his connection to Kurohana's father, and what are his plans for the "Divine energy" he's detected?

Will Mio ever confess her feelings, or will Shojin's blissful ignorance create a tragic distance? Can their childhood savior bond evolve into something more?

How will the dynamic between the legendary "Ying-Yang Duo" (Lucas and Soren) and the new generation shift as danger approaches? Will their rivalry be a hindrance or a unique strength?

What is the true price of being "Untamed"? Sylax thrives on chaos, freedom, and found family. But can such a wild, unstructured strength withstand an organized, divine-backed war? Will the coming storm force them to conform, or will their untamed nature be the very weapon that saves everyone?

Author's Note

To every reader who has walked the chaotic, cobblestone streets of Oakhaven and found a home within the untamed heart of Sylax,

When I first began scribbling the tales of Scarlett and her band of glorious misfits, I never imagined we'd come so far. Fifty-six chapters. A demon attack. A legendary return. Festivals of light and memory. And through it all, you've been there—laughing at Shojin's antics, holding your breath during the battles, and perhaps (like me) wiping away a sneaky tear during the quieter moments.

This story, The Untamed Guild of Sylphania, has become more than a project. It's a shared world. Your enthusiasm, your comments, your theories—they are the kindling that keeps this fire burning bright. You saw the potential in a grumpy guild master and a trio of apprentices, and you've championed them ever since. For that, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Volume 2: Part I ends here, under the fading glow of the Oaklight lanterns. We've celebrated bonds, unveiled secrets, and welcomed legends home. But as Scarlett gazes into the night, we feel it too—the quiet before the storm. The mysteries have only deepened:

· A divine enemy moves in the shadows.
· A prince walks a razor's edge between duty and heart.
· A demon king finds our guild... interesting.
· And the bonds of our untamed family will soon face their greatest test.

This pause is not an end, but a gathering of breath. The foundations have been laid, the family assembled. What comes next will challenge everything they—and perhaps we—believe about strength, loyalty, and what it truly means to be free.

I am hard at work forging the next part of this journey. The stakes will be higher, the battles fiercer, and the emotions... untamed. I cannot wait to share it with you.

Until then, keep a little chaos in your heart.

With immense gratitude,

ShadowK

P.S. To the one who inspired the steadfast Kokan, to the friend whose laughter echoes in Shojin's, and to all of you who see a bit of yourselves in the mess and magic of Sylax—this story is for you. The adventure is far from over.

The Untamed Guild of Sylphania
— Vol.2 Part 1 —

Sylax—the so-called lowest rank guild of Sylphania—hides a secret no one knows. United by untamed souls, adventure, and a fierce sense of freedom, it is stronger than any kingdom.

Scarlett, the shadow elf guild master, built Sylax and the Kingdom of Sylphania herself. She carries the blood of shadows, humans, and the divine wind, a legacy of power few can imagine. Her apprentices—Shojin, the fiery wild brat; Kokan, the cold-hearted water prodigy; and the demon princess of the Fire Demon Realm—are her headaches and her pride, though she'd never admit it.

In Sylax, no one is the true protagonist. Each member fights, explores, and lives for themselves, yet the guild moves as a single organism, a family of untamed souls. Adventure, chaos, and secrets await those who dare enter Oakhaven, the home of Sylax.

shadowK brings you the next chapter of fantasy, action, comedy, and adventure in The Untamed Guild of Sylphania series.